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ABSTRACT

The right to birth registration, the official recording of the birth of a child by some administrative level of the state as a permanent and official record of a child's existence, is enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. This digest examines birth registration, a right that opens the door to other rights, including education and health care, participation, and protection. The digest explains why the births of more than 50 million children go unregistered each year. It is noted that, in legal terms, these children do not exist and their right to an official name and nationality is denied; their access to basic services may be severely jeopardized and they may find themselves more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The effects can last a lifetime, with the unregistered adult unable to vote, open a bank account, or obtain a marriage license. The digest asserts that countries need to know how many people they have and how many there are likely to be in the future in order to plan effectively. The digest emphasizes the crucial importance of birth registration, explores the obstacles to universal registration, and highlights the actions, including awareness raising, legislative changes, resource allocation, and capacity building, that are needed to ensure the registration of every child. (Contains 242 endnotes.) (KB)

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BIRTH REGISTRATION

RIGHT FROM THE START

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BIRTH REGISTRATION: RIGHT FROM THE START

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EDITORIAL

The child who is not registered at birth is in danger of being shut out of society – denied the right to an official identity, a recognized name and a nationality. In 2000, an estimated 50 million babies – more than two fifths of those born – were unregistered.[1] These children have no birth certificate, the 'membership card' for society that should open the door to the enjoyment of a whole range of other rights including education and health care, participation and protection.

This Digest examines the situation of children who are denied a fundamental human right and who, in legal terms, do not exist. With no document to prove how old they are – or even who they are – they are likely to join the millions facing discrimination and the lack of access to basic services such as health and education. And, with no proof of age and identity, they may lack the most basic protection against abuse and exploitation. An unregistered child will be a more attractive 'commodity' to a child trafficker and does not have even the minimal protection that a birth certificate provides against early marriage, child labour, recruitment in the armed forces or detention and prosecution as an adult.[2] In later life, the unregistered child may be unable to apply for a passport or formal job, open a bank account, get a marriage licence, stand for elective office or vote. The 'invisibility' of unregistered children makes it more likely that the discrimination, neglect and abuse they experience will remain unnoticed.

Unregistered children are, almost inevitably, the children of the poor and excluded. Lack of registration exacerbates their poverty and underscores their marginalization. While birth registration does not of itself guarantee education, health, protection or participation, its absence can put these fundamental rights beyond the reach of those already on the margins of society.

In today's world, with massive population movements, organized child trafficking and illegal adoption networks, and increased targeting of civilians in warfare, birth registration is more essential than ever.

But the importance of registration – or the lack of it – goes beyond the individual. Without strong civil registration systems, it is virtually impossible to plan or implement effective development strategies. Unregistered children who do not show up in the data are often overlooked in social development planning. They are completely invisible when important policy and budget decisions are made.[3] And without proper birth registration, a country cannot even be certain of its own birth or death rate.[4]

Birth registration is a fundamental step towards good governance and a vital element in the fostering of democratic processes.[5] Not only does the process of registration allow effective administration and bring children to the notice of decision-makers, it is the official and positive recognition of a new member of society, who is entitled to all the rights and responsibilities of a valued citizen.

The value of birth registration as a fundamental human right continues to be overlooked. There is a continuing lack of awareness of registration as a critical measure to secure the recognition of every person before the law, to safeguard the protection of his or her individual rights, and to ensure that any violation of these rights does not go unnoticed.

This Digest has three aims. First, to emphasize the value of birth registration. Second, to explore the obstacles to universal registration. Third, to identify the action needed to bring about universal birth registration. There is little doubt that the development of systems to ensure the registration of all children at or shortly after birth – fulfilling their right to acquire a name and nationality – is a tangible and realistic goal that can be reached within the next decade.

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"The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."

1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 7

SCOPE OF THE DIGEST

This Digest examines the impact of non-registration of births on the more than 50 million unregistered children born each year. It also highlights the importance of birth registration within the overall framework of a civil registration system, the causes of poor registration, and the strategies and interventions needed to achieve the universal registration of children.

The right to birth registration is enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which applies to every human being under the age of 18 years. For the purposes of this Digest, therefore, the term 'unregistered children' refers to children under 18 years of age whose birth has not been officially recorded.

WHAT IS BIRTH REGISTRATION?

Birth registration is the official recording of the birth of a child by some administrative level of the state and coordinated by a particular branch of government. It is a permanent and official record of a child's existence. Ideally, birth registration is part of an effective civil registration system that acknowledges the existence of the person before the law, establishes the child's family ties and tracks the major events of an individual's life, from live birth (see box) to marriage and death. A fully functional civil registration system should be compulsory, universal, permanent and continuous and should ensure the confidentiality of personal data. It should collect, transmit and store data in an effective way and guarantee their quality and integrity. It should have two main objectives: legal and statistical. Such a system, and its instrumental value in safeguarding human rights, contributes to the normal functioning of any society.

The registration of a child's birth enables that child to obtain a birth certificate. In some cases, the issuing of a certificate automatically follows birth registration, while in others a separate application must be made. In either case, a birth certificate is a personal document issued to an individual by the state. The registration of a birth and the issuing of a birth certificate are, therefore, two distinct yet interlinked events.

A birth certificate is the most visible evidence of a government's legal recognition of the existence of a child as a member of society. If a child is not registered at birth and has no birth record, he or she will not have a birth certificate with that all-important proof of their name and their relationship with their parents and the state. Indeed, a birth certificate is the document that generally determines the nationality of the child, as many countries grant nationality according to place of birth. In countries that employ other criteria, a birth certificate is still the most important documentary evidence of a child's nationality, stating as it does the nationality of the parents.

What should be recorded?

While the information shown in a birth record and on a birth certificate may vary from country to country, the names of the child, the parents, the attending physician, midwife, birth attendant or other witnesses are generally included, together with the date and place of birth, and the name and signature of the registrar. Other information may include the age of the mother and the child's height, weight and gestational age. Ensuring the rights to a name and nationality and to know one's parents implies that registration should, as a minimum, include the child's name, sex, date and place of birth, and the name, address and nationality of both parents.[6] Some countries, including Qatar, have additional information on the certificate, such as immunization status, and issue an immunization card along with the certificate. While a person's name may be their most distinctive 'mark' of individuality – a right recognized in the CRC – additional data, such as family ties and nationality, promote the child's right to legal protection by parents and by the state.

Definitions of live birth

The World Health Organization defines a live birth as a baby that breathes or shows any other sign of life after delivery, irrespective of the duration of pregnancy. The UN view is that all babies born alive should be registered and their existence recognized, whatever their gestational age and regardless of whether they are still alive at the time of registration.[7] Not all countries adopt this internationally recommended definition. In the Philippines, for example, a baby with a gestational life of less than seven months is not regarded as live-born if the child dies within 24 hours of delivery. In this case, the baby's birth and death go unrecorded. However, if a full-term baby is born dead, it is considered a foetal death and recorded as such.[8] Other countries have yet to apply definitions of live birth nationwide. Some states in Mexico, for example, follow the international recommendations, while others do not require the registration of the birth or death of children who die within 24 hours of delivery.[9]

BIRTH REGISTRATION AND THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Lack of birth registration is a violation of the child's inalienable human right to be given an identity at birth and to be regarded as part of society. Article 7 of the CRC gives every child the right to be registered at birth by the State within whose jurisdiction the child is born. This means that states must make birth registration accessible and available to all children, including asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, documented or otherwise.

Birth registration and the right to a name and nationality

Most states confer nationality according to the principle of *jus soli* (which translates literally as law of the soil) or *jus sanguinis* (the law of blood) or a combination of the two (see box). The question of nationality is one of the most sensitive and complex aspects associated with birth registration and can compromise the registration of a child. This is particularly true for children of asylum seekers or refugees, or from minority or ethnic groups who experience discrimination.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors implementation of the CRC, has raised concerns about children who are denied a nationality and are, therefore, stateless. It noted, for instance, that, "Syrian-born Kurdish children are considered as foreigners or as 'maktoumeen' (unregistered) by the Syrian authorities and face great difficulties in acquiring Syrian nationality, although they have no other nationality at birth."[10]

Human rights standards and birth registration

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):

While many CRC articles have links to birth registration, the following (paraphrased) are of particular relevance. In some cases, such as the right to family reunification, the proof of identity offered by birth registration and birth certificates is critical.

Article 1: a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law of the country, majority is attained earlier;
Article 2: all rights shall be respected and ensured to every child within the State's jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind;
Article 3: the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions regarding children;
Article 4: the State shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of children's rights;
Article 7: the child shall be registered immediately after birth and has the right to a name and nationality and to know and be cared for by his or her parents. The State shall ensure the implementation of these rights in accordance with national law and its obligations under the relevant international instruments in this field, in particular where the child would otherwise be stateless;
Article 8: the State will respect the child's right to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations, and will intervene in cases where a child is illegally deprived of any of these elements of identity with a view to re-establishing it;
Article 9: the State shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will;
Article 10: applications by a child or his or her parents to enter or leave a State for the purposes of family reunification shall be dealt with in a positive, humane and expeditious manner;
Article 21: the State shall ensure that adoption of a child is authorized by competent authorities on the basis of proper information, including information about the child's parents, relatives and legal guardians and shall ensure that children involved in inter-country adoption enjoy the same safeguards and standards as children being adopted within their country;
Article 32: States recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and shall provide for a minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment;
Article 35: States shall take all appropriate measures to prevent the abduction of, sale of or traffic of children;
Article 38: States shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces.

Other texts:

The right of every child to be registered at birth, to acquire a name and nationality, and the responsibilities of the State in this area are also underlined in other human rights standards.

1948: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 15: "Everyone has the right to a nationality."
1961: Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, Article 1: "A Contracting State shall grant its nationality to a person born in its territory who would otherwise be stateless."
1966: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 24: "Every child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have a name. ... Every child has the right to acquire a nationality."
1969: American Convention on Human Rights, Article 20: "Every person has the right to the nationality of the State in whose territory he was born if he does not have the right to any other nationality."
1979: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Article 9, women shall be granted "equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children."
1989: 35th Session of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights notes the importance of birth registration for child protection, particularly for illegitimate children and to reduce the sale or trafficking of children.
1990: African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article 6: "Every child shall have the right from his birth to a name ... shall be registered immediately after birth ... has the right to acquire a nationality."
1990: International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, Article 29: "Each child of a migrant worker shall have the right to a name, to registration of birth and to a nationality."
1997: European Convention on Nationality, Article 6: "Each State Party shall provide in its internal law for its nationality to be acquired *ex lege* by ... foundlings found on its territory who would otherwise be stateless ... [and] for its nationality to be acquired by children born on its territory who do not acquire at birth another nationality."

Some states confer limited nationality to certain groups of children, such as children of parents who are not themselves citizens – a form of discrimination that violates Article 7. Myanmar, for example, has three levels of citizenship with corresponding levels of rights – full citizens, associate citizens and naturalized citizens. To become a full citizen, a person has to be able to prove Myanmar ancestry dating back prior to 1824. Officially only full citizens can train to be doctors or engineers, stand for election, or work for a foreign company, UN agency or foreign embassy.[11] The Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its concern that as a result of Myanmar's citizenship regulations, some categories of children and their parents might be stigmatized or even denied certain rights.[12]

In Israel, restrictive registration procedures for Palestinian children whose fathers were not born in Jerusalem have led to growing numbers of unregistered children. A 1998 study found that many of the 250 children in the Sumoud camp in Israel did not hold official Israeli birth certificates, even though at least one parent was a legal resident of Jerusalem.[13] The fact that the West Bank and Gaza do not form a sovereign state means that nationality and citizenship remain major concerns for Palestinians.[14]

Adopted children sometimes suffer discrimination. For example, it is difficult for adopted non-Palau children to gain Palau citizenship and they do not automatically qualify for health services or other government subsidised services.[15]

Children whose mothers are married to foreigners can face problems. In Yemen, the child of a Yemeni mother married to a foreigner does not have the right to Yemeni citizenship by birth. If the mother marries a man from a country where nationality is dependent on both parents having the same citizenship, the child could be left stateless.[16] This problem has also arisen in Egypt where many under-age girls, often from poverty-stricken families, are given in marriage to men from the Gulf States and then abandoned. Their children are not eligible for Egyptian citizenship or any state health and education benefits.[17]

Many countries have rules about the composition of names and these are generally protective of children's rights. While they may help to prevent discrimination against a child who is abandoned or born out of wedlock, there are cases where these rules conflict with the principle of non-discrimination. In Saudi Arabia, for example, all boys receive an identity card at the age of 15. Boys who are illegitimate find that no family name appears on their cards, which, in effect, highlights their illegitimate status – a status that, according to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, is linked to discrimination in such areas as inheritance, custody and guardianship.[18] In certain situations illegitimate children can adopt fictitious names such as 'Saudi' or 'Jeddawi' (from Jeddah) but they are not allowed, under any circumstances, to take their mother's family name.[19] The rules that regulate names can also be discriminatory where minority groups have different naming traditions. In Morocco, for example, Dahir Law no. 1.96.97 requires newborns to be registered with a Moroccan first name and not, as in some traditional practices, with a name based on their city, village or tribe. In the former Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Government at one time banned Christian names. Meanwhile, Zairean nationals in Belgium could not register their children with African names.[20]

The principles of jus soli and jus sanguinis

A country's political constitution or founding charter generally determines who is a national, who is an alien, and how nationality can be acquired or lost. Some governments follow the principle of *jus soli*, whereby those born within the country's territory are nationals, even if one or both parents came originally from another country. In this case, birth registration gives the child automatic right to citizenship of the country in which he or she was born. This is the system found in most countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean, except Haiti and some English-speaking areas.

A number of countries grant nationality according to the principle of *jus sanguinis*. In this case, a child does not have an automatic right to citizenship of the country of birth if neither parent is a national of that state. This system applies in most of Asia and the majority of countries following Islamic law. In some countries applying *jus sanguinis*, such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, nationality may only be passed on by a father who is a national.

In the *jus soli* system, the entry of birth in the civil registry is enough to ensure nationality, but under *jus sanguinis*, nationality may depend on documentary evidence – generally a birth certificate – that at least one parent is a national of the country in question.[21] In a country that follows the *jus sanguinis* system, difficulties may arise for children of parents who are nationals of a country that grants nationality on the *jus soli* principle. In such cases there is a risk that the children remain stateless.

Most countries in the industrialized world combine *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*, with more emphasis on the former in Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States, and on the latter in Germany, Japan and Switzerland.

WHY IS BIRTH REGISTRATION IMPORTANT?

For the child

Birth registration establishes the child's identity and is generally a prerequisite for the issuing of a birth certificate. A fully registered birth and the accompanying birth certificate help a child secure the right to his or her origins, to a nationality and also help to safeguard other human rights.

Right to education and health

For many children the impact of non-registration is felt in the insidious, gradual and long-term loss of potential caused by lack of education. Current estimates suggest that at any one time there are almost 120 million children of primary school age out of school – especially working children, children with disabilities, children affected by HIV/AIDS or armed conflict, the children of the poor or ethnic minorities, rural children and, consistently, girls.[22] These are often children who live in circumstances where birth registration may be rare. While

it is only one of the factors that determine whether or not a child attends school, birth registration and a birth certificate – or the lack of one – can be crucial.

In some countries such as India, Myanmar and Thailand, authorities encouraging primary school attendance do not enforce, or have abolished, the legal requirement to produce a birth certificate for school enrolment. In others, such as Kenya and Uganda, such requirements are rarely enforced in rural areas.[23] However, there are still many countries, including Cameroon, Lesotho, the Maldives, Sudan and Yemen, where a child cannot go to school without a birth certificate. In Turkey, a birth certificate is required to obtain a primary school diploma and, therefore, to progress to secondary education and in Tanzania a certificate is needed for university enrolment. Those applying for educational scholarships in Malaysia must also produce a birth certificate. While birth certificates are not mandatory for school enrolment in Sri Lanka, they are required for taking examinations.

In Algeria, the need to produce a birth certificate for enrolment is said to reinforce both registration and education, with birth registration reported to be as high as 97 per cent while primary enrolment is 98 per cent.[24] But the relationship between registration and education remains ambiguous, and rigid requirements can have a negative effect if birth registration is not universally accessible. In Nepal, where birth registration is just 34 per cent and birth certificates are not a legal requirement for school enrolment, the Ministry of Education has, nevertheless, instructed schools to demand such certificates. This has become a barrier to school attendance in several areas, even though some principals do not follow the instruction.[25] In Pakistan it is thought that the lack of birth certificates keeps significant numbers of rural poor children out of school, even though there are no national guidelines requiring such certificates, with regulations varying from province to province. A national workshop on the subject recommended that local government officers register all previously unregistered children when they go to enrol in school[26] – a policy already adopted in Brazil.[27]

Education is not the only service denied to unregistered children. Medical care may be less easily available, or cost more than it would to a 'citizen' and it is generally more difficult for medical programmes and campaigns, such as immunization, to identify and reach unregistered children. Similarly, an unregistered child is unlikely to be able to obtain social protection from the state. In Israel, the fact that many Palestinian children born in camps are unregistered seriously jeopardizes their access to Israeli public health and welfare services.[28] In Kyrgyzstan, refugees and non-citizens may have their access to health care and other social services compromised, while in China, unregistered girls – in particular – may not enjoy their right to health care and education.[29]

Right to a family environment

A comprehensive birth registration system, linked to the coordinated issue of birth certificates, can help to protect children against illicit changes to their identity, such as changes of name or falsification of family ties. This is in keeping with Article 8 of the CRC, and the state's obligation to preserve a child's identity.

One area of major concern is the production of false papers for illegal adoption. Guatemala, with 70 per cent illiteracy in rural areas and extreme poverty in 46 per cent of households in its western provinces, has been reported as the world's fourth largest source of children for inter-country adoption. Court statistics for 1998 indicate that 1,252 children were involved in inter-country adoptions that year. The report of the Special Rapporteur to the UN Commission on Human Rights states that, in Guatemala, "legal adoption appears to be the exception rather than the rule ... It would seem that in the majority of cases, international adoption involves a variety of criminal offences including the buying and selling of children, the falsifying of documents, [and] the kidnapping of children ... recruiters prefer to deal with mothers whose babies have not had their births registered, or have not yet been born."[30]

Protection against exploitation and abuse

Despite widespread commitment to the protection of children's rights and the near universal ratification of the CRC, child exploitation and abuse appear to be on the rise[31] and thrive on non-registration. In India, for example, children under the age of 14 are prohibited by law from working in hazardous industries, yet violations are widespread and many children are reportedly labouring in quarries or factories that produce matches, fireworks, glass or bricks.[32] In Kenya, an estimated 3.5 million children aged 6 to 15 are working – more than one quarter of all children in the country.[33] Genuine enforcement of legislation to end such abuses requires the clear establishment of a legal minimum age for access to employment and a backdrop of effective birth registration to confirm the age of the children concerned.

One growing trend in child exploitation is child trafficking for prostitution and other contemporary forms of slavery, often in the guise of household domestic work. The trafficking of children has reached alarming levels, with several million children now caught up in criminal trafficking networks.[34] While there are, as yet, no solid statistics on the links between unregistered children and those who are trafficked, a child who has no official identity or proven nationality – and who can therefore remain hidden and unprotected – must be a more attractive prospect to a trafficker. This also means that geographic areas where registration levels are low are more likely to be targeted by trafficking operations.

According to the UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Trafficking in the Mekong Sub-region, assessments in northern Thailand – an area with many ethnic minorities – suggest that lack of registration and citizenship are significant factors in child trafficking and exploitation.[35] In Nepal, despite the Government's Plan of Action against Trafficking in Children adopted in 1998, many under-age girls are still taken across the border to work in Indian brothels. In one reported case police were unwilling to trace a girl known to be in this situation because, without a birth certificate, there was no proof of her age, nationality or even of her existence.[36]

Girls can be just as vulnerable within their own countries. Again in Nepal, sexual relations with a girl under 16, with or without her consent, are regarded as rape and are punishable by law. However, without a birth certificate it is hard to confirm the girl's age and obtain a conviction.[37] In Bangladesh, where sex workers must be 18 years of age or over and 'registered' with the police, there is evidence of false affidavits acquired on behalf of children to allow them to enter the sex industry. If a birth certificate, or an identification card derived from that certificate, were the only legal standard for proof of age in Bangladesh, this practice could certainly be curtailed.[38]

A birth certificate can also offer protection against other forms of child abuse and exploitation such as early marriage, military recruitment and participation in armed conflicts. In Bangladesh, child rights activists have recognized the importance of birth registration as a guard against child marriage, the employment of children and even polygamous marriages.[39] Low-income parents, for example, may conceal the real age of their daughter at the time of her marriage in order to rid themselves of an economic 'burden'. The lack of birth registration in rural areas makes it difficult to verify the age of the girls concerned.[40]

Then there are the extreme dangers faced by children involved in armed conflicts, including those recruited as soldiers. An estimated 300,000 young people under the age of 18 are thought to be taking an active part in as many as 30 conflicts around the world. This is a global phenomenon, affecting children in countries as far apart as Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and several nations in sub-Saharan Africa. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which came into force in February 2002, is an international agreement to raise the age limit for recruitment and deployment from 15 to 18. It is expected to play a crucial role in ending the use of children as soldiers,[41] but if it is to have any impact at all, young people must be able to prove their age.

Juvenile justice

If children are arrested, a birth certificate can protect them against prosecution as an adult and ensure that they receive any special legal protection that should be made available to juveniles. This is important even in relation to the most trivial crimes, but when it comes to serious crimes in countries where the death penalty is imposed, proof of age can mean the difference between life and death.

It is also important to ensure that juveniles receive special protection and are not, for example, detained alongside adults. The dangers are clear, including the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Malawi, where there is a high rate of virus transmission in prison, there are reports of adults posing as juveniles and of juveniles being taken into the adult section of the prison. As few prisoners have birth certificates to verify their age, it is hard for prison staff to keep the under-18s separate.[42]

In Rwanda, following the genocide in 1994, there were delays in arranging separate detention facilities for suspects under 14 (the age of criminal responsibility under Rwandan law) because, in many cases, their age could not be determined.[43] In Sri Lanka, government medical officers are supposed to provide Probable Age Certificates to juveniles without birth certificates, but this procedure is not always followed.[44] And in Ethiopia, which has no civil registration system, the age of young suspects is determined by medical opinion, which can delay the legal process.[45] In Ghana there are reports of police being unable to determine the age of juveniles with accuracy and, therefore, incarcerating them in adult prisons,[46] while in Nepal, police often claim that young offenders have reached the age of majority. Without a comprehensive birth registration system, and birth certificates to provide proof of age, it is impossible to contradict the police assessment.[47]

State benefits and participation in society

The importance of birth registration and of birth certificates does not end with childhood. A birth certificate is needed to obtain a passport, a marriage or driver's licence, to open a bank account, to apply for and secure formal employment and to inherit property. It also provides the documentary evidence needed for a more sophisticated (and thus more secure) identification card that may include a photograph, unique number, blood type and so on.

A birth certificate may also be needed to obtain family allowances, social security, insurance, credit and a pension. In Uzbekistan, for example, where almost 100 per cent of under-fives have been registered,[48] the state pays a bonus to parents for registering their children, after which they are eligible for ongoing payments. In the Russian Federation, parents must include a copy of their child's birth certificate in applications for state child allowance. According to the Ministry of Labour, even parents in the troubled Russian Republic of Chechnya can provide birth certificates as proof of eligibility for child allowances.[49] A birth certificate is also essential to claim state benefits in countries such as Bahrain, Jordan and Qatar.[50]

In addition, a birth certificate proving identity and age is the gateway to democratic participation in civil society, enabling a person not only to vote in electoral processes, but to stand for elective office.

While the exact linkages of 'cause and effect' between the impact of registration and all of these issues require much more research, one thing is clear: non-registration contributes to, and is part of, a pattern of child deprivation, vulnerability and exploitation.

For the country and for international organizations

Birth registration and birth certificates contribute to an individual's sense of citizenship and, overall, to the coherence of civil society.

At the national level, every country needs to know its own vital statistics – its characteristics and trends in terms of births, deaths and other key indicators, such as marriage, divorce and fertility. In simple terms, every government needs to know how many people there are in the country, and how it can plan to meet their needs. Civil registration is, for example, the most accurate way to update population census data collected at ten-year intervals. Effective registration that provides detailed information on population growth at every administrative level, from national to local, allows a government to measure not only overall trends in fertility and mortality, but also differentials among population groups and administrative levels. It allows the analysis of fertility and mortality rates by age, and the development of projections of demographic change. It helps to identify geographic, social and gender disparities within the national boundaries – the least developed parts of a country may have the lowest birth registration coverage and the greatest need for services and active support. Without accurate population data, these areas may be overlooked and denied the necessary budgetary resources.[51] The lack of such data may, therefore, lead to the further exclusion of people already marginalized from the social and economic life of their country.

The data provided by effective civil registration allow the accurate planning, development and implementation of development policies, particularly in health, education, housing, water and sanitation, employment and agricultural and industrial production. They enhance a country's ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of these policies[52] and help

governments allocate appropriate resources to those in greatest need, thereby narrowing disparities. In addition, data provided by registration are invaluable to the life-cycle approach to human development. They can be used to plan and coordinate immunization efforts, monitor child growth, promote universal enrolment in primary education, monitor and address drop out – particularly among girls – and other key steps in a child's life.

Accurate and comprehensive demographic data serve the international community – and ultimately children themselves – by helping international organizations, financial institutions and NGOs to programme their activities with greater accuracy and impact.

From a health perspective, continuous information on births and deaths is essential for the compilation of crucial development indicators such as statistics on perinatal, neonatal, infant, child and general mortality at all administrative levels. While there are no precise data on birth registration and HIV/AIDS, it seems likely that HIV/AIDS, lack of birth registration and the denial of other human rights have a complex and interlinked relationship. HIV/AIDS thrives in populations facing extreme poverty, conflict and marginalization – in other words among the very populations least likely to be registered. AIDS has orphaned at least 10.4 million children currently under 15 (ie. they have lost a mother or both parents)[11] and unknown numbers are denied their right to inherit parental property. Guaranteeing this right becomes more difficult if the child has no legal proof of their identity, including family ties. Birth registration for all children – giving proof of identity to those without parents – would be an effective way to ease the impact of HIV/AIDS on the children left behind.

There are important implications for countries such as South Africa where, in 1999, about 95,000 of the estimated 4.2 million South Africans infected with HIV were under the age of 15.[14] Without effective registration, the information about these children that is so critical to an understanding of the dynamics of HIV/AIDS – the status of their parents, the community into which they were born and, of course, their sex and age – is compromised, as well as the ability to create policies to protect their rights.[15] Indeed, lack of registration means that many of these children die without having been acknowledged and supported as legitimate citizens of their own country.

Civil registration goes beyond development issues to contribute to improved governance and is an important element in a well-rooted democracy. Electoral rolls are compiled from a country's civil register. The credibility and transparency of voting lists, the prevention of electoral fraud and the possibility for all citizens to enjoy their democratic rights are, therefore, dependent on accurate data on births and deaths.

Other methods of gathering data, such as sample surveys and population censuses (see box on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys), provide valuable information, but unlike civil registration, these techniques do not produce records with legal value that protect children's rights. Censuses, usually held only once every decade, provide a statistical portrait of a nation at one particular point in time. Civil registration data, however, recorded as and when an event occurs, enable authorities to spot trends at much shorter intervals, such as yearly, quarterly or even monthly. Special studies, one-time surveys and other sampling techniques are expensive and often not cost-effective. However, many of the developing countries that face severe problems in establishing and maintaining civil registration systems tend to rely entirely on such temporary or ad hoc methods.[16]

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)

Many of the data provided in this *Digest* are derived from the findings of the most recent set of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS 2). These surveys were conceived to provide an affordable, fast and reliable household survey system in situations where there were no other reliable sources of data. They were conducted as part of the review of progress made in achieving the goals of the World Summit for Children in 1990. Based upon a questionnaire and manual developed by UNICEF, the original round of surveys provided essential mid-decade information on the survival, health, nutrition, education and protection of children. By 1996, 60 developing countries had carried out stand-alone MICS, and another 40 had incorporated some of the MICS modules into other surveys. The end decade surveys (MICS 2) were carried out in 66 countries, drawing on the experiences of the mid-decade MICS and their evaluation. MICS2 was developed by UNICEF in consultation with a wide range of organizations including WHO, UNESCO, ILO, UNAIDS, the United Nations Statistics Division, the Centre for Disease Control, Atlanta, MEASURE (USAID), Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. All MICS statistics for birth registration refer to children between 0 and 59 months.

SCALE OF NON-REGISTRATION

By their very nature, data concerning unregistered children are approximate. Indeed, the global problem may be far greater than current estimates suggest because of the sheer number of children born each day at the outer edges of society – those born at home, in inaccessible areas, or into a population that is set apart from mainstream society because of its ethnicity, poverty or geographical remoteness. While most unregistered children are found in developing nations, this is a problem that is present to some degree in every country – rich and poor alike. From a statistical perspective, the registration of 98 per cent of a country's births (the level achieved in industrialized countries in 2000)[17] may be defined as universal coverage, but from a human rights perspective, universality is only achieved with the registration of each and every child born under a State's jurisdiction.

According to UNICEF, an estimated 41 per cent of births worldwide were not registered in 2000, undermining the right of over 50 million children to an identity, name and nationality.[18] In 39 countries, at least 30 per cent of all children under the age of five were not registered at birth, and in 19 cases, the figure was at least 60

per cent. These figures do not include countries that have no registration system, or for which data are not available.[59] Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of annual births not registered by region in 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa, over 70 per cent of births were unregistered, as were 63 per cent in South Asia.[60] Indeed South Asia[61] tops the league in terms of sheer numbers of unregistered children, with approximately 22.5 million, or over 40 per cent of the world's unregistered births in 2000,[62] compared to a total of around 17 million in sub-Saharan Africa. In the Middle East and North Africa,[63] nearly one third of the children born in 2000 (or some three million) lacked legal recognition of their identity, while in the East Asia and Pacific region[64] 22 per cent of births in 2000 – some seven million children – were unregistered.[65]

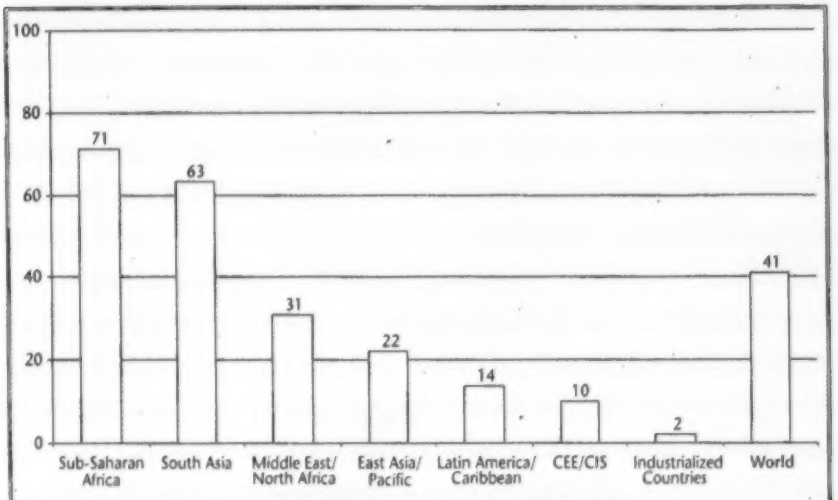

Figure 1: Percentage of annual births not registered by region, 2000
Source: UNICEF (2001) Progress since the World Summit for Children, "Levels of Birth Registration, 2000 Estimates," UNICEF, New York.

Figure 2 presents levels of birth registration coverage by country according to UNICEF's most recent estimates. Of the 160 countries included, 82 have registration coverage greater than 90 per cent. At the other end of the data spectrum, countries for which there is no published information include Afghanistan and Eritrea, which have virtually non-existent registration systems at present, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the civil registration system collapsed during years of economic crisis and civil war.

A comparison of these coverage rates against those of 1998[66] shows a number of changes. For example, Tajikistan, like other Central Asian countries, was estimated to register over 90 per cent of births in 1998.[67] Coverage had fallen to only 75 per cent in 2000.[68] The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS2) suggests that the main reason for this fall was the cost of registration. Tajikistan's economy has seen a severe downturn in the last decade, and in 1999 the average monthly income was US$6, while the cost of registering a birth was US$5.[69] Another factor may be the weakening of the administrative structures responsible for registration and the collection of vital statistics.

Falls in registration coverage are also reported in two Latin American countries: the Dominican Republic and Honduras were estimated to have at least 90 per cent birth registration in 1998, but according to MICS2 data for 2000, both had slipped to a lower percentage category (70 to 89 per cent). These changes may reflect the difficulty of obtaining accurate and coherent data for birth registration over time. In the Dominican Republic, for example, the 2000 coverage figure is probably more realistic than that for 1998, as there are known to be problems relating to the marginalization of some parts of the population and the non-registration of Haitian migrants.

In two other Latin American countries, Panama and Venezuela, coverage improved. Panama increased from a rate of 80 per cent in 1996[70] to 90 per cent or

Figure 2: Map of levels of birth registration, 2000 estimates
Source: UNICEF (2001) Progress since the World Summit for Children, "Levels of Birth Registration, 2000 Estimates," UNICEF, New York.
Note: Data for Namibia have been modified on the basis of the Demographical Household Survey 2000, Namibia, Preliminary Report, communicated by UNICEF Namibia, 21.08.2001

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more in 2000, an increase that was helped by the 1998 public campaign, "Your Child has Rights. Register Them".

In many developing countries, national averages mask disparities between regions and between urban and rural areas. In Niger the proportion of children registered in urban areas is more than twice that of rural areas (85 per cent and 40 per cent respectively).[71] In Chad, Myanmar and Senegal, registration rates in urban areas are more than 30 percentage points higher than in rural areas.[72]

In many countries, disparities are often related to uneven overall development. In India the coverage is over 90 per cent in the states and union territories of Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Lakshadweep, Pondicherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, but under 30 per cent in Assam, Bihar, Manipur, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.[73] It is significant that these data are in line with the literacy rates revealed in the same survey: in all five states with the highest level of birth registration, more than 70 per cent of those over 15 are literate, while this is the case in only one of the six states with registration levels under 30 per cent. In the remaining five, levels of literacy range from 45 to 60 per cent.[74] Sierra Leone demonstrates other links. According to MICS2 data, the national average for birth registration in 2000 was 47 per cent, but this disguises crucial discrepancies, with the Western and Southern Regions demonstrating far higher rates of coverage than the Eastern and Northern Regions (81 and 67 per cent respectively, compared to 50 and 27 per cent). The Western and Southern Regions also had higher primary enrolment rates (75 and 48 per cent compared to 35 and 29 per cent) and lower rates of children who had not been vaccinated (5 and 9 per cent compared to 15 and 16 per cent).[75]

Ethnic minorities, particularly when they live in remote areas, tend to have lower rates of registration than the majority population. In Viet Nam, the Government is trying to close the gap between the estimated 91 per cent coverage in urban areas and the 25-30 per cent rate among ethnic groups in mountainous regions.[76] Nomadic people also tend to be under-represented in birth registration coverage. Reliable data are hard to come by, but in Somalia, where birth registration is almost non-existent, nomadic populations nevertheless lag behind: in urban areas around 3 per cent of children are registered, while it is thought that as few as 0.2 per cent of nomadic children enjoy this right.[77]

The 2000 figures confirm that fully functioning registration systems with virtually universal coverage can be found in even the poorest countries, if those countries have made registration a priority. Many of the countries of the former Soviet Union with per capita GNPs of under US$750 such as Armenia ($490), Azerbaijan ($550), Georgia ($620), Kyrgyzstan ($300), Moldova ($370), and Uzbekistan ($720) have coverage rates of 90 per cent or more.[78] These figures suggest that once social and administrative structures for birth registration are estab-

High achievers in birth registration

Algeria: 92 per cent of mothers give birth in medical facilities and register their babies on the spot and the National Statistical Office confirms that 97 per cent of babies are registered within the statutory five days after birth. Many of the remainder are registered later as birth certificates are required for school enrolment, which stands at 98 per cent.[79]
Malaysia: The system is decentralized, with local police officers, village headmen and midwives all legally required to notify the District Registrar of any births occurring in their respective areas. At the national level, birth registration data are entered in a centralized database that is accessible by authorized agencies through a web site.[80]
Mauritius: With 47 civil registration offices for a population of just over one million, birth registration is a simple and user-friendly procedure, and almost all parents comply with the legal requirement to register their children within 45 days of birth. Late registration requires an order from the District Magistrate or Civil Registrar, but in every case the first copy of the birth certificate is free.[81]
Uzbekistan: To welcome the new citizen, the state pays the mother a bonus when she registers her child. Registration is, therefore, almost 100 per cent and children of all religious and ethnic backgrounds have the birth certificates that are needed for immunization, health care and school enrolment.[82]

Birth registration: a major priority

Bangladesh: With 2000 coverage of 39 per cent or less[83] (the exact figure may be lower than 10 per cent) the Government sees that universal coverage of the 15 million under fives[84] will not be easy. However, a growing number of high profile campaigns at district and city levels are being conducted across the country. Going from house to house, volunteers and health workers managed to register at least one million children between 1997 and 2000 in campaigns backed by extensive publicity and training on child rights, including rights workshops for children. The campaigns are managed by inter-sectoral district birth registration committees that include local NGOs and community leaders.[85]
East Timor: The entire civil infrastructure had to be rebuilt after the turmoil of 1999. To establish a birth registration system, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) issued Regulation 2001/3 to set up a Central Civil Registry with offices in each district. Since 1 September 2001, it has been mandatory for parents to register their children within four weeks of the birth.
Ecuador: Late registration has been a particular problem in Ecuador where, in the early 1990s, it was estimated that only 50 per cent of children were registered in their year of birth.[86] The government, in partnership with UNICEF, has supported a series of important initiatives to improve this situation. Children of 12 years and below were registered during campaigns in 1995, 1997 and 1999, when efforts were concentrated on the country's northern border area.[87] Since then, emphasis has shifted to the situation of the country's indigenous children. Birth registration in Ecuador in 2000 was estimated to be between 70 and 89 per cent.[88]
Ethiopia: The Family Law, passed in 2000, mandates birth registration at the kebele, or local level. The Central Statistics Authority is conducting pilot studies with a view to establishing a national civil registration system.[89]
Namibia: Since 1998, when Namibia was listed as having no official data in the UNICEF report, *The Progress of Nations*, the Government has taken up the birth registration data challenge. Pre-existing manual data have been entered into a newly computerized system and there is an ongoing nationwide information campaign, backed by the Directorate of Information and Broadcasting, to persuade all those who are not registered to do so. Next steps include mobilizing health facilities and traditional leaders to register all newborns within the legal time limit of 14 days. A preliminary report in 2000 suggested that coverage was approximately 70 per cent.[90]
Uganda: Birth registration is a high priority in Uganda and was featured in the President's 2001 inaugural speech. The first step to revitalize civil registration was a household census by members of Parish Development Committees. Implementation of a decentralized community-based registration programme is on target, with one million of the country's 12 million[91] under-18 year olds registered within the first year.[92]

Comments from the Committee on the Rights of the Child

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors the implementation of the CRC in every state that has ratified this treaty. It offers observations and recommendations on the reports submitted for its consideration by states parties to the Convention.

Bhutan: "Noting the difficulties imposed by terrain and settlement patterns, the Committee ... recommends that the State party make greater efforts to ensure the timely registration of all births, ... [and] consider the establishment of mobile registration offices and registration units in schools."[93]

Cambodia: "Children of non-Khmer citizens, regardless of their legal status, or refugees, when born in Cambodia, should always be registered at birth even if they are not entitled to Cambodian nationality ... In addition, the Committee recommends that the State party conduct awareness raising campaigns to ensure that all children are registered at birth."[94]

Dominican Republic: "While the Committee takes note of the State party's efforts in the area of birth registration, it remains concerned that a large percentage of children are not registered and are not provided with identity cards, thus preventing them from enjoying their rights fully. In particular, concern is expressed about the situation of children of Haitian origin or belonging to Haitian migrant families whose right to birth registration has been denied in the State party. As a result of this policy, those children have not been able to enjoy fully their rights, such as to access to health care and education."[95]

India: "Given that lack of timely birth registration can have negative consequences on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms by children, the Committee is concerned, in the light of article 7 of the Convention, that the births of a very significant number of children in India are not registered."[96]

Kyrgyzstan: "Given that failure of timely registration of the birth of children can have negative consequences ..., the Committee is concerned that many parents in rural areas, particularly internal migrants, fail to register their children owing to a lack of knowledge that it is necessary, lack of access to registration facilities, lack of documentation, and inability to pay registration fees."[97]

Lesotho: "The Committee is concerned at low levels of birth registration and, in particular, that some registration procedures are inaccessible, cumbersome and expensive."[98]

Paraguay: "The Committee notes with concern that a large number of children, in particular those belonging to indigenous groups and/or living in rural or remote areas, are not registered because of distance or because parents are unaware of the importance of birth registration. It further notes that registration is not free."[99]

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: "The Committee is concerned that, in spite of relevant legislation and an increasing number of births in hospitals, there are still children in the State party who are not registered at birth and is further concerned at the fact that a large proportion of unregistered births are of Roma children."[100]

lished, even countries with modest GNPs can achieve consistently high levels of coverage. These cases also point to another potentially important factor for registration: in all but Moldova, for which there are no relevant data, over 90 per cent of women who give birth are attended by trained health personnel.[101] It is likely that countries with high birth registration rates tend to have high rates of births in medical facilities, or attended by trained personnel, although more research is required to confirm this. The logic is simple: mothers come into close contact with a branch of the national infrastructure at a critical point in terms of registration – the actual birth of the child. Clearly, this link is even stronger when medical facilities take responsibility for initiating the registration process.

This hypothesis is supported by findings from West African states such as Senegal, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. In Senegal, 25 per cent of children whose births were registered were attended at birth by trained personnel, compared to only 14 per cent of children whose births were not registered. In Côte d'Ivoire, the figures are 33 and 19 per cent, while in Cameroon, the proportion is more than double: 31 per cent of registered births were attended by skilled personnel, compared to only 15 per cent of non-registered births. The potential to improve birth registration coverage through contact with trained medical staff is indicated by the fact that in all three countries, the vast majority of births, between 50 and 70 per cent, receive no assistance whatsoever.[102]

In some cases, medical centres work with registration services. In Argentina, for example, where registration coverage is well over 90 per cent and around 98 per cent of births are attended by trained personnel,[103] hospitals and clinics provide the registration service with a certification of delivery for every birth.[104] In India, the states of Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and West Bengal have adopted a similar 'notifier system' based on the health and family welfare system to complement the registration network.[105] And most of the industrialized countries that enjoy 'universal' registration coverage, rely heavily on health facilities to notify the registrar of the birth of a child.

WHO ARE THE UNREGISTERED CHILDREN?

Generally, unregistered children tend to be found in countries where there is little awareness of the value of birth registration, where there are no public campaigns, where the registration network is inadequate, or where the costs of registration of children are prohibitive.

Birth registration is highest among children in urban areas who have strong links to the mainstream mechanisms of society, such as health services. It is generally low among children who, for one reason or another, live on the margins of society. Children born into rural communities are less likely to be registered than their urban counterparts, just as children born to illiterate parents in countries including Brazil, India, Haiti, Honduras and Peru are less likely to have a birth certificate than those born to literate parents.

There is little information on the characteristics of unregistered children in industrialized countries, yet the obstacles they face in a state where registration is the norm (and society is structured to reflect this norm) may be particularly daunting.

Unregistered children may be the children of single mothers. In Viet Nam it is reported that some unmarried women

are reluctant to register their child out of embarrassment or out of a mistaken belief that children can only be registered if the parents are married.[106] In Nicaragua, women living in consensual unions cannot register their children if the father does not sign the birth record. Not all fathers are willing to comply as their signature implies acknowledgement of paternity.[107] In Nepal, registration not only requires the name of the father, but often excludes the children of second or third wives. While polygamy is common in rural areas, the practice is illegal and registrars fear that they would legitimize the union of the parents by registering their children.[108]

There are a number of countries where children of an established marriage between people of different nationalities cannot be registered or are stateless. And children of migrants or displaced people are disproportionately represented among those unregistered. In Mongolia, for example, the national coverage rate is thought to be 98 per cent, but a recent study found that many children whose parents had moved to the capital in search of work had no birth certificates.[109]

Similarly, the registration of orphans or children who have become separated from their families for any reason, such as trafficking or war, may be particularly difficult. In this regard, it is worth noting that, between 1985 and 1995, over one million children lost their parents, or were separated from them, as a result of warfare.[110] In Uganda, the collapse of the birth registration system has exacerbated the difficulties of family reunification for children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army. The country's programme to revitalise birth registration recognizes this, with specific interventions planned for such vulnerable children.[111]

Papers are often lost or destroyed in civil conflict, and parents subsequently have difficulty establishing the identity of their children and, consequently, in registering them. This was the case in Guatemala, where the civil records of hundreds of communities were destroyed,[112] and in Tajikistan, where former refugees had lost their documentation and could not register newborns upon their return.[113] Refugees fleeing Kosovo in 1999 had their papers taken from them as they crossed the border.[114]

Unregistered children are often members of particular indigenous or ethnic groups. Among those lagging behind on registration are the Kurds in Syria, Tatars in the Ukraine and Russians in Estonia and Latvia.[115] Pygmies are significantly underrepresented in Cameroon's birth registration coverage of close to 80 per cent and, as a result, are more likely to be excluded from the health and education services that require a birth certificate.[116]

Even in some countries with high rates of birth registration, certain communities are consistently overlooked, and a sustained effort is required to revise this situation. Ecuador's 1995 month-long birth registration campaign – with a budget of US$324,000, more than 8 billion Ecuador Sucre – managed to register around 130,000 of the 390,000 children thought to be unregistered. But it reached only 7,000 of an estimated 80,000 unregistered indigenous children.[117]

Children from cross-border ethnic groups may also face barriers to registration, as in the case of children of Haitian origin in the Dominican Republic. Similar difficulties may be faced by children born in Costa Rica whose parents have crossed the border illegally from Nicaragua.[118]

Refugee and internally displaced children

Refugee children, and those who are internally displaced, are particularly likely to miss out on birth registration. Host countries are often unwilling to facilitate birth registration and even more reluctant to grant nationality to refugee babies born on their soil. For example, children born in Iran to the millions of Afghans who fled their country during the Soviet occupation have not been registered in their host country.[119] The subsequent civil war in Afghanistan, followed by the international military action initiated in October 2001 will only exacerbate this situation. In Lebanon, most Palestinian children are registered as refugees with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), but the unknown numbers who do not have this official status do not have the right to be registered at birth. Indeed, Palestinian children born in Lebanon do not have the right to acquire a nationality and do not enjoy their rights to education and primary health care. In practice, UNRWA provides these services as relief operations.[120] In India, many people from the Chakma and Hajong tribal groups remain stateless, despite the several decades that have passed since they fled from present day Bangladesh.[121]

A stateless child is in a dangerous situation, lacking the guaranteed protection of a specific national jurisdiction. In the case of a refugee child without proper shelter, possibly traumatized, often separated from his or her family, the lack of state protection is particularly risky, leaving the child vulnerable to discrimination, neglect and exploitation. And a refugee child born in a country that applies the *jus sanguinis* principle to nationals of a country that applies the *jus solis* principle runs the risk of having neither nationality.

Rights to a name, nationality and state protection apply to a refugee child as to any other. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued specific policy guidelines to cover the situation of children born to women who are refugees from their homeland. These guidelines say: "Statelessness is often caused by States' deliberate policies not to confer nationality to children born to refugees. It may also be caused by the existence of conflicting laws regarding nationality ... All refugee children in the country of asylum must be considered as having, or being able to acquire, including through naturalization, an effective nationality."[122]

UNHCR is responsible for ensuring that the births of all refugee children are registered. When there appears to be insurmountable opposition by a State to the integration of births of refugees and national children, UNCHR encourages national authorities to establish a parallel and equivalent birth registration system. If the State fails to register the birth of refugee children through its national procedures, UNCHR organizes local registration systems to ensure, at a minimum, that the date, place of birth and the names and nationalities of both parents are recorded in a traceable way. UNHCR has also facilitated the issuing of birth certificates in areas in which national systems are not available.

Birth registration and certification are equally crucial for internally displaced children who, uprooted by conflict or natural disasters, remain in their own country and may need to be reunited with their families. In Sudan, for example, an initiative has been taken to issue birth certificates to children in Internally Displaced People's camps in war-affected areas precisely because these certificates represent a child's legal link to his or her parents.[123]

Late registration

According to Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a baby should be registered "immediately after birth", implying urgency and the need to act within a reasonably short period of time[124] – a period of days rather than months. The probability of registration is far greater immediately after a child is born and, if a mother gives birth in hospital, one of the best opportunities for registration is lost once she is discharged with her baby.

Most states consider a delay of more than 30 days in registering a birth as a late registration,[125] although in Saudi Arabia the government requires the registration of births within just three days. This is feasible because the government authorizes every hospital and primary health centre to issue birth certificates. In some countries, registration fees and even fines and judicial procedures may be imposed if the child is not registered soon after birth. While this may encourage most parents to register their children in a timely way, it may present yet another barrier to those whose marginalization already makes timely registration unlikely, such as families who live in remote areas poorly served by registration services or who cannot afford the costs of registration. This is a research challenge. At what point do fees for late registration tip the balance in favour of timely registration? At what point do they begin to work against it? And what other factors – geographic, ethnic, and traditional – need to be considered when addressing late registration or considering the introduction or abolition of fees or fines?.

Viet Nam, where less than half of all families register children within the legally prescribed time period,[126] has abolished fines for late registration and has introduced different time limits: one month for lowland areas and two months for the country's more remote areas. Syria also allows different time limits: 15 days if the child is being registered in the governorate where the birth took place, or 30 days if registration takes place elsewhere.[127] In Thailand the 1991 law on civil registration mandates free registration for every newborn within 15 days, or, if the child is born outside the hometown, within 30 days. Late registrants receive a different birth certificate and the District Officer imposes a small fine of about US$0.40. This is seldom necessary, however, as some 90 per cent of Thailand's children are born in medical facilities, where they are given notification of birth forms for the registrar. The national birth registration coverage in 2000 was over 90 per cent.[128]

While every child should be registered at birth, efforts have been made to register all those under 18 years of age that have not yet been registered. Special campaigns have been launched in many countries to facilitate registration procedures, including the waiving of fees for late registration. However, it can be very difficult to reach older children. Some countries have introduced systems that allow flexibility and provide legal documentation of identity. Sri Lanka, for examples, tackles late registration with a certificate of probable age that is valid for all educational and employment purposes. In Cameroon older people without a birth certificate can obtain one by getting a Certificate of Apparent Age from a doctor.[129] In Bangladesh, where late registration is the norm and many people seek certification later in life to secure formal employment or obtain a foreign visa, there are proposals to permit births to be registered up to six years of age. This initiative, which would simply require an oral statement made by a child's parents or caretakers before a magistrate, is intended to ensure that all young children in the country can have access to health and education services.[130]

While there are cases where allowances can be made for late registration, the act of registration should, ideally, take place as close to the date of birth as possible. This not only ensures that a child enjoys the right to family ties, a name and nationality from the earliest moment, but helps to guarantee up-to-date and accurate national statistics.

BARRIERS TO REGISTRATION

The main barrier to birth registration is that it is not universally perceived as a fundamental right and, as a result, is given low priority at every level.[131] Registration may not be seen as important by society at large or by a government facing severe economic difficulties, by a country at war, or by families struggling with day-to-day survival. Its value is often neglected in the face of problems that are more immediate and tangible and the long-term potential of birth registration to ease such problems is frequently overlooked. It is often seen as nothing more than a legal formality, with little relevance for the development of the child, including access to health care and education services. The end result is a lack of support for birth registration from national and local authorities, and little demand from the general public, who remain unaware of its importance.

The registration procedure itself may be too complex and bureaucratic, or the legislative framework inadequate or even non-existent. It may be too costly for parents. In many countries, parents are charged for registration and/or the issuing of a certificate. Or there may simply be too many logistical hurdles, including the sheer difficulty and expense of travelling to the nearest registration office from a remote area, losing one or two day's work in the process and leaving other children unsupervised.

Political barriers

Birth registration faces one major political stumbling block: lack of political will. This can be passive, stemming from the failure of governments, politicians and civil servants to grasp the importance of birth registration as a human right or the crucial role of civil registration records in a modern society. At a workshop on civil registration in Asia in 1999, delegates expressed the view that the governments of developing countries do not play a sufficiently central role in the promotion of birth registration in their countries.[132] Although such problems are often reported, little research has been carried out to determine why they persist.

The consequences include lack of legislation or its weak enforcement and lack of coordination and cooperation between the different ministries and sectors that have a stake in birth registration. There may be examples of poor governance, such as blurred lines of responsibility and decentralization without adequate resources. Lack of political will leads to inadequate financial allocations in this area, insufficient and poorly trained personnel, ill-equipped offices and shortages of the materials needed to get the job done. It means that responsible authorities do not ensure the supply of birth registration facilities, promote the necessary information and awareness campaigns or

stimulate public demand for such services. In the worst-case scenario, lack of political will means that there is no functioning registration system at all.[133]

In stark contrast, some political leaders may be only too well aware of the significance of birth registration as the gateway to other human rights. Political barriers to registration may be erected deliberately to, for example, exclude one group and block their enjoyment of human rights, while promoting the interests of a predominant group. Such exclusion is an effective way of deliberately massaging population figures, denying the official existence of members of a particular ethnic minority or followers of a particular religion, or preventing their participation in the nation's political life.

In Kosovo, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Albanian children faced significant barriers to registration under the Serbian regime of 1989-1999. Restricting the possibility of birth registration for Kosovar Albanians downplayed their numbers and minimized their official visibility. To register her child, a mother needed documentary proof that the baby was born in hospital. But to give birth in hospital, she needed her own identity card and that of the baby's father, as well as a health card. Registration then required a marriage certificate and the names of two witnesses, both of whom were also fully documented, and the baby's vaccination certificate. As identity cards and health cards were issued only to those working in governmental institutions, registration was impossible for the many Kosovar Albanians who lost government jobs in 1989. Most Albanian women had their babies in private clinics or at home and large numbers of babies went unregistered over the ten-year period.[134]

In a significant number of countries, fear of mass influxes of asylum seekers, refugees or economic immigrants presents barriers to the registration of births of non-nationals and, as a result, the national 'membership' that goes with it.

Administrative barriers

Political barriers, passive or intentional, have consequences for the administration of birth registration. Its low priority means low status for registration authorities and, therefore, inadequate resources.

In Bangladesh, where a small proportion of births are registered, responsibility for birth registration is delegated to officials at the lowest level of local government – a level that has lost much of its significance over the years. These officials lack awareness of their duties and face shortages of standardized forms and registers. While improvements are now being made at this level, Bangladesh has no provision for a central registrar of births or deaths and there is no civil registrar's office with the power to coordinate and monitor birth registration.[135]

Low status for registration translates into inadequate support for registrars. For systems to work efficiently, local registrars need support such as training and guidance on registration laws and procedures and access to detailed guidelines to help them resolve any registration problems. The lack of such support is a major obstacle to birth registration.

Registrars may receive meagre salaries or no salary at all. In Kenya, assistant chiefs are responsible for registering home births – a good system that brings the registration service into local homes. However, because of their poor pay, the assistant chiefs themselves see registration as an added burden for which they receive no proper compensation.[136] A similar system in Lesotho faced difficulties when, at one point, chiefs demanded payment for carrying out registration duties that were supposedly unsalaried.[137]

Low pay and low status and the resulting lack of motivation can, in some cases, open the door to corruption. In Guatemala, it has been reported that recruiters, hired by lawyers, pay rural midwives around US$50 to register the birth of a non-existent child, using a false name for the birth mother. On payment of a further US$50, another woman 'becomes' the mother, is given a baby, usually stolen, and goes to Guatemala City to give the child up for adoption.[138]

Similarly, without proper supervision and monitoring to ensure adherence to civil registration laws, there is the risk that vital information will go unrecorded, and of fraudulent birth entries and illegal changes to birth registries. A 1994 case study on the war-torn country of Angola revealed two parallel registration systems – one state-run that barely functioned at all, and one unofficial system allowing people to buy fake documents such as birth certificates.[139] Bangladesh's low birth registration rate is not helped by easy availability of fraudulent birth certificates. It has been suggested that many of the birth certificates in circulation in Bangladesh are false.[140]

Legislative barriers

Despite obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, some countries have no legislation requiring birth registration. In Eritrea, for example, births are only registered upon specific request to the one national office, and anyone needing a birth certificate must provide up to four witnesses. A study is now under way to examine the possibility of introducing birth registration in each of the six zobas, or regions.[141]

Other countries do not yet have a specific law addressing civil registration, and issues related to registration may be included, in a general fashion, in the civil code or other laws relating to the family, personal identification, the national statistical system and so on. Such laws are either so general that they offer insufficient guidance to local registrars, or address only some technical aspects of registration. In Nicaragua, the recording of vital events falls under the 1904 civil code and efforts have been made over the years to legislate on different aspects of civil registration, resulting in a diverse set of laws and decrees. A comprehensive law has now been drafted.[142]

Where birth registration laws do exist, many are out of date, complex or inflexible, posing practical barriers to registration. Those that are decades old may now be out of step with current realities, inadequate in terms of international law, overly centralized, insensitive to cultural practices, patriarchal or ineffective in obtaining valuable health statistics based on gestational age, weight at birth and so on. Birth registration in Bangladesh is governed by laws adopted in 1873[143] and in Benin, where the basis of the civil registration legislation dates back to 1950[144] (pre-independence) steps are now being taken to introduce a new family code.[145]

In some cases, legislation does not allow enough time for registration, given the geographical terrain and the availability of registration services, as in Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire where births must be reported within 15 days.[146] In Côte d'Ivoire, there are also costly and complicated legal procedures for late registration.[147]

Problems are also created by laws that do not cover the entire country, allowing conflicting systems of registration, and by the absence of clear and detailed rules and regulations. In Indonesia – the fourth most populous nation in the world, and where 37 per cent of children under five had not been

registered in 2000[148] – there are two parallel identification systems, both of them imported. The birth and civil registration system was introduced by the Dutch administration and has different categories for Europeans, Timur Asing or 'Oriental foreigners' and Pribumi or native Indonesians. The second system, which is mandatory, is household registration introduced by the Japanese during World War II. While the first system confers legal proof of existence, it is the second that is crucial for daily life in Indonesia. All households are issued with a family card that entitles each member over 17 to an identification document known as the Kartu Tanda Penduduk (KTP). The KTP should be carried at all times and is essential for obtaining a driving licence, voting, dealing with a bank, moving, purchasing land, or receiving a proper burial. A birth certificate is needed to enrol in school, obtain a passport, get married or work for the state, but can be substituted by a KTP for all of these activities with the exception of school enrolment. There is little incentive, therefore, to register births, particularly as parents often use the 'live birth notification' paper instead of a birth certificate when enrolling their children in school.[149]

Failure to enforce existing legislation is a major issue, linked to the low priority given to birth registration. In a number of countries, civil registration documents are rarely demanded as proof of name, date and place of birth or family relationships, even though they may be required by law. Lack of publicity and awareness raising with respect to existing birth registration legislation is also frequently a barrier to ensuring its effective enforcement and achieving universal registration.

Legislation should be consistent and complementary. In some cases, legislation that supports birth registration may be undermined by legislation in another area. In China, for example, the one-child policy works against the registration of any subsequent children as parents fear fines for contravening family planning regulations.[150] It is estimated that the number of unregistered children in China may be as high as six million.[151]

Economic barriers

There are two sets of economic barriers to birth registration: national and individual.

At the national level, governments with meagre budgets and competing demands may be reluctant to divert scarce resources to the creation of an effective civil registration system. And a registration system, once established, requires ongoing resource allocation, albeit relatively modest, to keep functioning. If governments do not fully appreciate the value of such a system, the costs may be the decisive deterrent.

In existing registration systems, underresourcing fuels such basic problems as the scarcity of well-trained, full-time personnel, the lack of registration facilities and shortages of basic materials such as registers and certificate forms. In some countries, including Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines and Venezuela, the national authority for civil registration has only technical responsibility over local registration officials, who depend administratively and financially on local authorities such as the mayor's office. Local budgetary constraints can lead to a high turnover of registration staff or their use for other duties.

National economic constraints can drive a wedge between central authorities and the individual. This can undermine birth registration, particularly if the link between women and health services is broken. Women's access to maternity centres, for example, has declined in a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa because of increased poverty and higher medical costs in the wake of the economic changes of the 1990s. In Cameroon, for example, GNP declined by 1.5 per cent per year over the decade, and the proportion of deliveries attended by trained medical personnel fell from 64 per cent in 1983-1994 to 55 per cent in 1995-2000.[152] While Cameroon's birth registration remains relatively high – close to 80 per cent – it is important, given this situation, to monitor closely the trends in vital registration.

At the individual level, birth registration and the issuing of the first copy of a birth certificate should be free of charge. Many countries, however, have registration fees and these are an obvious disincentive. A survey into the reasons for non-registration in Indonesia found that 47 per cent of parents believe that birth certificates "cost too much" – a view also held by more than 20 per cent of university-educated mothers.[153] In Bolivia it is estimated that between one fifth to one third of children are unregistered, with indigenous peoples and the poorest sectors of society over-represented in this category.[154] Significantly, before the introduction of the Children and Adolescents Code in 1999, both birth registration and the issuing of a birth certificate in Bolivia required a fee. The new Code was intended to abolish these charges and birth registration is now free, but the issuing of a birth certificate still requires a payment of at least US$7. The reluctance of the Electoral National Court to abolish charges is partly explained by the fact that civil registration officials do not receive a salary from the State, but earn a fee for the civil acts they perform.[155] In some countries, such as Peru, birth registration itself is free of charge, but parents have to pay for medical certification that the child was born alive.[156] Fees, however, are not restricted to the developing world. In the Australian state of New South Wales, for example, birth registration is free, but a birth certificate costs Aus$29 (US$15).[157]

Late registration may involve significant costs and lengthy judicial procedures – yet another disincentive. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo the penalties for late registration make it prohibitive for almost all parents, and even timely birth registration is too expensive for poor people.[158]

Corruption tends to increase costs to parents. There have been media reports in Bangladesh of parents being charged 1,000 Taka (US$20) for a birth certificate, when the official fee should be just 45 Taka (US$0.90).[159]

Apart from the direct costs of registering a child and obtaining a birth certificate, there are also 'opportunity costs' – the costs in terms of time, travel and absence from work or from the family residence and responsibilities – that parents incur when birth registration is not readily accessible. An evaluation in Kwale district in Kenya in 1999 found that, although birth registration was free, the costs of travelling into Kwale to obtain a birth certificate were felt to be exorbitant.[160]

Neglect of cultural and community realities

Even an existing civil registration system, backed by relevant legislation, may be hampered by a failure to recognize the culture and everyday realities of local communities. The lack of connection between central authorities and citizens, coupled with low awareness about the value of birth registration, contributes to poor demand for this service.

In Madagascar, where traditional naming practices are considered sacred, civil registration is not seen as crucial.[161] It is believed that names can affect a person's luck and the illness, accident or death of a person with the same name as a child may result in that child's name being changed. Nicknames are also common, and in practice can acquire the status of a surname.[162] These customs can make it difficult to safeguard a child's identity. In some other African countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, there is a strong belief that a newborn child should be introduced into society only gradually. A great deal of thought is given to a suitable name for a child and this is not shared with the authorities until the traditional process is complete. By then, the legal time limit for registration may have elapsed.[163] In Kenya, registration has been seen by many as an alien concept inherited from the colonial era, rather than as an important service.[164] In addition, some communities are reported to be reluctant to reveal the birth of a baby to strangers because of a fear of witchcraft and because it breaks a traditional taboo on the counting of children.[165]

There can be serious language barriers to registration. In South Africa, where registration suffers from a legacy of distrust from the days of apartheid, birth registration forms are available only in Afrikaans and English and these tend to be the languages used by office personnel. Those speaking other languages may be unable to communicate with registration staff and may have to pay for help to complete the necessary forms.[166]

Another barrier can be poor understanding of the importance of registration among the population. A 1999 Tanzania survey revealed that almost 75 per cent of those who had not registered their children said that they "didn't know the baby must be registered", or "didn't know where to register".[167] Similarly, if sufficient weight is not given to a birth certificate as a legal document to prove age and to enable the enjoyment of children's rights, popular demand will, as in Bangladesh, be low.

Gender discrimination

In a number of countries, birth registration suffers as a result of a gender bias that excludes women from the entire process. In such cases, registration is far more likely to be delayed if the father is absent.[168] The Nepalese law which says that only the most senior male household member can register a birth effectively disempowers the mother and shuts out single women.[169] In Peru, registry employees may refuse to handle a registration unless the child's father is present.[170] In Lesotho, a patrilinear society, single women sometimes experience problems and are urged to register their children with the name of their own father.[171]

In many cases, the registration problems facing a single mother can be insurmountable. In Ecuador, for example, the mother may have to negotiate with the child's father to persuade him to acknowledge his child.[172] In contrast, the law of Responsible Paternity introduced in Costa Rica in 2000 states that single mothers should provide all the information required for registration when a child is born in a hospital or health centre, including the name of the father. If the presumed father contests paternity, he is obliged to undergo a DNA test. If this test confirms paternity, he is included in the birth record, and the child takes his last name, followed by the mother's last name. Clearly, if the result is negative, no such responsibility is placed upon the man. If the man refuses to take a DNA test, the birth record will in any case carry his name and any additional information provided by the mother.[173]

Countries with patriarchal nationality laws undermine their own registration systems. Bangladesh and Pakistan, where legal systems stem from colonial practice, are among those countries that grant citizenship according to the father's nationality only. This contravenes Article 9 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which states that women should enjoy equal rights with men in relation to the nationality of their children, and Article 2 of the CRC, which prohibits any form of discrimination against a child on the basis of the parents' sex, national origin or status. There may also be problems for children whose parents are of different nationalities, such as those born to Saudi Arabian women married to non-nationals, and the several hundred thousand children of Egyptian mothers who have neither birth certificates nor Egyptian nationality because their fathers are nationals of another country.[174]

The gender discrimination that keeps girls out of school can have two direct impacts on birth registration. First, in countries where attending school is also a mechanism for registration, girls may miss out on both of these valuable opportunities. Second, when girls who have missed out on education become mothers they, in turn, are less likely to register their children. In Tanzania, for example, a 1999 survey found that over 49 per cent of children whose mothers had more than secondary education were registered, compared to only 2.7 per cent of children whose mothers had no education.[175] Similarly, in Chad, results from MICS2 indicate that 50 per cent of children whose mothers had at least secondary education were registered, as were 31 per cent of those whose mothers had primary education. In comparison, the registration level was only 20 per cent among children whose mothers had not been to school at all.[176] This clearly suggests that universal education is a key to birth registration.

Geographic barriers

The most obvious geographic constraint to birth registration is the distance to the nearest birth registration facility. The greater the distance to the point of registration, the more the opportunity and travel costs rise for parents who may also incur fines if the registration is late. Moreover, parents may make a wasted trip, as offices often have inconvenient and irregular opening hours, staff may be absent and there may be shortages of paper and other materials.

In Papua New Guinea there is just one birth registration site – in the capital, Port Moresby – serving a population of roughly four million people across more than 460,000 square kilometres,[177] including 600 islands. Not surprisingly, in September 2000, the Office of the Civil Registrar received only 122 birth registration forms, in a country thought to average over 8,000 births a month.[178] In Yemen, there are few civil registry field offices to reach the 85 per cent of the population who are scattered across rural areas.[179]

Accessibility is influenced by location and terrain, the condition of infrastructure such as roads, and the availability of public transport. Urban populations are less subject to such constraints, as shown by many examples of discrepancies between

rural and urban registration rates. In Tanzania, the rural registration rate of just 3 per cent compares to an urban rate of 22 per cent,[180] while in Indonesia coverage in rural areas is less than half that of urban areas.[181]

Where registration takes place is an important issue. Ideally, a child should be registered as close as possible to his or her place of birth, but, as can happen in Central America, a mother may cross a national border to give birth in a particular health facility if there is no proper facility near her home. In China, births must be registered at the place of the parents' official residence, making registration particularly difficult for the growing numbers of migrant workers.[182] Similar rules applied in Viet Nam until 1998, when a change in the law allowed the issuing of birth certificates in the place of birth.[183]

War and internal conflict

Countries ravaged by war or internal conflict rarely have a functioning system of civil registration, for obvious reasons. And the impact can last for years.

Uganda once had a thriving registration system. Created in 1904, the system covered the entire country by 1930 but was completely unraveled as a result of bloodshed under General Amin and the years of turmoil that followed. Uganda is now making great efforts to revive birth registration services using its Birth and Death Registration Act, 1970, as the legislative starting point.[184] Cambodia's registration records were destroyed under the Pol Pot regime and the Government is still rebuilding its civil registry. In Rwanda, birth registration stood at over 80 per cent in 1973, but birth certificates with information on the holder's ethnic origins were used to deadly effect by genocidal killers in 1994. By 1998 Rwanda was among the countries with the lowest levels of birth registration,[185] although the most recent figures give some grounds for optimism.[186]

Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, war and inter-ethnic strife in countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia have completely undermined birth registration systems.[187] In a positive example, the campaigns initiated in recent years in Angola have demonstrated that, despite the devastation of war, demand for birth registration among a population can be extremely high (see box).

Birth registration campaigns in Angola[188]

Angola, which has endured more than 30 years of armed conflict, faces major barriers to the achievement of universal birth registration. But it also illustrates the importance of birth registration as a human right – even in the most difficult circumstances. Between December 1998 and October 1999, the number of officially recognized internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Angola rose from 524,000 to 1.7 million. These IDPs include children, often separated from their families, who are particularly vulnerable. Efforts to reunite them with their families have been hampered by the fact that many are unregistered and have no proof of identity. The conflict itself makes it essential that children can prove their age to prevent their recruitment into armed forces.

Findings from MICS2 indicate that less than 39 per cent of Angola's children are registered, and in 2000, the Angolan Ministry of Justice suggested that this figure might be as low as 5 per cent. The Government recognizes the importance of registration and, despite the difficult internal situation, is committed to improving coverage. March 1998 saw the launch of a National Children's Registration Campaign that registered nearly half a million children. This was the foundation for a new and more ambitious initiative: a second campaign launched by the Government of Angola in August 2001 to register three million children by the end of 2002. The initiative is multi-sectoral, bringing together eight government ministries, as well as churches and other civil society organizations, NGOs, the private sector and UNICEF.

Registration under the campaign is free (it normally costs the equivalent of US$7.00), and a special law has been introduced to decentralize and simplify registration procedures. The involvement of churches has been crucial. The Government has given the Catholic and Methodist churches the legal power to register children, while other churches are participating in social mobilization, awareness raising and the formation of the mobile registration teams that began operating in rural areas in 2002. Registration initiatives have also been carried out in hospitals, IDP camps and schools.

The public response has been extremely positive. The first four months of the campaign (August to December 2001) saw the registration of more than 230,000 children. While sheer numbers are important, long-term sustainability is a priority for the partners and many of the campaign's best practices – particularly the legislative changes and the free registration of children under the age of five – will be adopted on a permanent basis.

ENSURING BIRTH REGISTRATION

While there is much to be done to achieve universal birth registration and the legal recognition of the two fifths of the world's children who are unregistered, many positive steps have been taken since the adoption of the CRC in 1989. And there is little doubt that the ultimate objective of permanent, continuous and universal registration, with all its benefits, is a goal within the reach of all states.

Initiatives to improve birth registration

A range of international, regional and national conferences, workshops and meetings, have shown that, while the cultural context and current situation of birth registration may vary across the world, there are certain approaches that are effective, particularly in combination. These include:

- involving all levels of society, including local communities;
- gaining the commitment of all stakeholders by raising awareness of the importance of birth registration as a child right and increasing demand for this service among the population;
- passing relevant legislation or updating old laws;

- ensuring coordination between relevant government ministries and institutions at all levels;
- creating the necessary infrastructure to reach the entire population;
- mainstreaming birth registration with other governmental activities and 'piggy-backing' on other ongoing service delivery programmes;
- building the capacity of relevant government officials through adequate training and materials;
- providing sufficient resources.

When considering such actions, decision-makers should be aware that short-term campaigns and initiatives to register children may be valuable, but the overall aim must be to establish a system of birth registration that is permanent and sustained. Furthermore, the most efficient combination of actions will vary from country to country according to national characteristics and the nature of the problems to be addressed. In some countries registration coverage is generally poor and must be improved overall, while in others, registration is basically effective, but specific groups, such as refugees or ethnic minorities, are overlooked, unreached or excluded.

Involving all levels of society

It is essential to create an effective 'supply' of birth registration services, backed by the stimulation of informed 'demand' from the population. This means that all levels of society, including local communities, national institutions, such as parliaments, local and national governments, NGOs and international organizations must be involved in developing, implementing and promoting policies and programmes for birth registration. This must be done in a coordinated way, as even the best conceived local initiatives will not get far without the committed support of national government. The country files of the United Nations Statistics Division show that the greatest progress on birth registration has been made in those countries – such as the Philippines – where the national government has been closely and consistently involved in registration projects.

Good examples of integrated approaches include the Unregistered Children's Project, organized by PLAN International and the NGO Committee for UNICEF in South East Asia, which has raised awareness and supported efforts at every level, and the 2001-2005 Government of Uganda/UNICEF Country Programme, which clarifies roles, responsibilities and capacity gaps at every level – local, district and national. The proposed model for birth registration in Uganda, which reflects the potential and capacity of each of these levels, states that, "In order to obtain regular and reliable information, recording of vital data must start at the community level".[189] (see box).

Community-level initiatives in Uganda

The 2001-2005 Government of Uganda/UNICEF country programme sees a community-based household census as the first step towards a grassroots structure for registration. Members of the local Parish Development Committee will visit every household and the data collected will be entered in a household register. This register will be updated by quarterly household visits to record all cases of birth, death and migration. In this way, every child between 0 and 8 years of age will be recorded – the beginning of a system that will lead to the the issuing of birth certificates for registered children at the sub-country level. To support this programme, a large number of community mobilizers will be appointed and trained in techniques such as participatory planning, communication and community mobilization to support child rights, including birth registration. One expected outcome is the development of child-centered community action plans, based on reliable child population data. In this way, birth registration will become a strategic tool to reach even the most marginalized children.

The success of strategies that combine top-down and bottom-up approaches also depends upon the ability of all levels to work together effectively. At the global level, for example, UN agencies, including the UN Statistics Division, the World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund and the UN Regional Commissions, have actively promoted partnerships between the registrars general of a number of countries. This has included training workshops and seminars, the development of methodological guidelines and the production of handbooks to help countries establish and maintain effective civil registration and vital statistics systems while enhancing international comparability. Meanwhile, the issue of birth registration is getting more high level political attention on a regional scale. When Latin American heads of state met at the Ninth Ibero-American Conference in Cuba in November 1999, they identified birth registration as one of five areas for regional cooperation.[190] Subsequently, the Eleventh Ibero-American Conference, held in Lima in November 2001, delegates committed themselves to achieve the free registration of all children within the first three months of life by 2005, and to the re-establishment of the child's official identity if it has been unlawfully withdrawn. Regional activities in Latin America are also being promoted in a joint project by the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) and UNICEF under the banner 'Right to a Name and Nationality'.

Regional cooperation is also being strengthened at the technical level. A regional workshop of member states of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in 1999 adopted the Cairo Declaration, resolving to achieve 100 per cent registration of all under-18 year olds by the end of December 2002.[191] In Asia, the Civil Registrars General held a convention in Bangkok in September 2000, the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of the CRC, to establish a network to promote birth registration across the region. This network, the Asian Birth Registration Committee (ABC), includes Civil Registrars from Australia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand, together with representatives from PLAN International, UNICEF and the NGO Committee for UNICEF. Asian regional cooperation was also enhanced by a December 2000 workshop in Surabaya, Indonesia.[192]

Raising awareness and gaining commitment

In Nepal, a survey of 770 households carried out by PLAN Nepal in June 2000,[193] found that 27.4 per cent of those surveyed said "don't know" when asked about the advantages of having a birth certificate. It is clear that awareness raising must be a central pillar of any civil registration campaign. But to reach all stakeholders it is important that messages are appropriate in form and content at every level, and that these messages encourage people to seek birth registration services and improved provision of these services. If the issue is to become a priority at the policy making level, and acknowledged as an important and fundamental right of

each citizen, the benefits to the economic and social development planning and overall good governance of the country must be demonstrated.

Messages for parents need to show the benefits of registering their children's births, highlighting the concept of registration as a right and underlining the ways in which the establishment of a child's identity, a birth certificate and proof of nationality can be useful throughout that child's life. However, in generating demand for birth registration it is important to incorporate flexibility so that no child is excluded because of over-complex legislation or over-rigorous application of regulations. This sentiment is encapsulated in the declaration issued by the recent high-level national consultation on birth registration in Bangladesh: "We ... feel that creation of demand for birth registration is required. The certificate will be introduced as requirement for access to certain services. However, compulsion should be introduced carefully and gradually, and compounded by building proper capacities at Registrar level and a flexible regime for late registration; and starting with the young children."[194]

While it is crucial to impress upon parents the importance of birth registration, children themselves should not be forgotten, and special messages should be tailored for them. In Thailand, the Child Friendly Schools Programme is helping children to learn about their rights, including birth registration.[195] Such initiatives bring immediate benefits, but also represent an important investment in future generations.

The media, in all its forms, is essential in awareness raising. Folk and traditional media can be very influential, particularly as performances bring the community together and invite audience participation. Radio has also been used to good effect in countries such as Uganda, where local channels broadcast birth registration messages at the district level.[196] And in every country, industrialized and developing, administrations should produce information on birth registration in minority languages to ensure that the message reaches every citizen. In India, for example, a civil registration campaign initiated in 1992, and intensified from 1997, is now a well-established programme operating in 15 different languages.[197] It includes television and radio spots, posters, stickers, printed messages on postal stationery, billboards and publicity and documentary films shown in cinemas.[198] This national campaign is backed by publicity produced by each of India's states.

Intensive, short-term registration campaigns can be successful if supported by sustained advocacy and a strong infrastructure. The Philippines conducts a mass campaign every February – designated 'civil registration month'. Awards for the best performing registrars, helping to motivate and empower them, complement nationwide publicity about the importance of registration. In Bangladesh, where communities are accustomed to mass campaigns on such issues as immunization and oral rehydration, the same strategy has been used with success for birth registration, as an introduction to sustained services. In Kurigram district, a campaign conducted in 2000 registered over 260,000 children under five, at an estimated cost of 10 Taka (US$0.20) each.[199]

However, successes can prove unsustainable when awareness raising is not accompanied by necessary administrative reforms. This was the situation after a 1999 campaign in Brazil, where the registration system is administered by public notaries who have little incentive to promote and sustain birth registration in commercially unattractive slums or remote areas.[200]

Resources can be maximized by combining campaigns. Birth registration can, for example, be linked to ongoing programmes such as immunization. In India, the Vitamin A campaign is also used to promote birth registration. And in Sri Lanka, the 1999 National Immunization Day (NID) saw a partnership between health officials and the Registrar General's Department. The first round of NID immunizations was used to undertake an initial assessment of the registration situation. During the second round, delegated officials of the Department began the process of registering some 25,500 children who had been identified as unregistered.[201]

Legislation

Universal birth registration can only be achieved within an effective legal framework that harmonizes registration with legislation to safeguard children's rights. In some countries basic civil registration legislation is lacking and needs to be enacted by relevant legislative bodies, in others it needs updating. Some countries are responding, such as Chile, which in 1996 passed a new comprehensive civil registration law, and Ethiopia, which enacted the Family Law in 2000, mandating the registration of births and paving the way for an entirely new nationwide civil registration system.[202] Other countries have yet to implement changes in their legislation. In Turkey, where some 26 per cent of children under five years of age go unregistered, the registration system is based upon family ledgers. To achieve universal registration, this system should be modified to permit registration on the basis of residence.[203]

New legislation should emphasize incentives and encourage demand for birth registration and birth certificates rather than relying upon penalties for non-registration. Governments should also ensure that national legislation enables *all* children within their jurisdiction to be registered and receive a birth certificate. This means not only making legal provision for registration of children of asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented workers, but also eliminating discriminatory legislation that prevents women registering a birth without the approval or presence of the child's father. Furthermore, countries where the *jus sanguinis* principle holds must, where necessary, adapt legislation to ensure that children born within their jurisdiction to non-national parents are not denied their right to a nationality.

Legislation should also ensure that birth registration and a birth certificate are provided free of charge – essential to the achievement of universal registration. As part of its Pact for Children, Argentina decreed in June 2001 that birth registration and the first copy of the national identity document would be provided free to all children under six months born in its territory, as the US$28 cost had proved prohibitive for many people.[204]

Finally, to avoid confusion, standard laws and regulations must apply throughout a country. In Mexico civil registration is the individual responsibility of the Federal District and each of the 31 states. Regulations and costs vary from state to state, so that a child under 18 can get a copy of a birth certificate for 7 pesos (US$0.76) in Guanajuato, but would have to pay 65 pesos (US$7.00) in Tamaulipas.[205] To streamline activities and reduce the number of unregistered citi-

zens, estimated at five million in 2000,[206] Mexico initiated a modernization programme in 1997 with a particular emphasis on indigenous, migrant and marginalized populations.

Coordination

In some countries, such as Chile, Costa Rica, Egypt, Jordan, Nicaragua, Syria and the city-state of Singapore, registration is entirely centralized and is undertaken by the national government. Other countries, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Nigeria and the USA, have completely decentralized systems, with sub-national or regional structures taking responsibility for registration. Most countries, however, employ a hybrid structure for registration, although achieving the correct balance for an optimal system can prove difficult. While decentralization offers certain advantages, including greater sensitivity and responsiveness to local conditions and an absence of 'top heavy' national administration, it can only work efficiently on the basis of a fair distribution of economic resources to prevent the perpetuation of regional disparities (see box below). And decentralization still requires an effective system of communication between sub-national and national authorities to ensure that crucial statistics do not remain at the local level. It is important, therefore, that decentralization is not regarded by central governments as a means of avoiding their responsibilities towards sub-national regions.

The extent to which ministries and institutions concerned with civil registration coordinate and cooperate at all levels is an important measure of the success of any system. In Argentina, where the vital statistics and civil registration system is decentralized, an Inter-Institutional Committee was established in 1997 to coordinate the work of the national and provincial bodies concerned, including the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Statistics and Census.[210] An Inter-Agency Committee on Vital Statistics has also been created in the Philippines.[211] Other countries such as Peru (1992) and Bolivia (1999) have established a central authority for civil registration. If collaboration is established between civil registration and personal data systems such as health information, identification and electoral services, the benefits of a fully functioning birth registration system soon become apparent to all players. Combining civil registration with personal identification services can not only enhance the security and accuracy of birth and death records, but also act as a strategy for increasing coverage by increasing the demand for vital records. In countries such as Nepal, where existing birth registration records are maintained by a range of health facilities including hospitals, health centres, health posts and private clinics, governments should act to officially recognize and integrate these entries.

While some developing countries lack the infrastructure to computerize civil registration and would find the cost of maintaining such a system prohibitive, automated systems offer the most effective means of ensuring coordination, preventing fraud and compiling, analyzing and archiving statistics. Countries that have computerized their civil registration system include Chile, Egypt, Jamaica, Jordan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Panama, Seychelles, Thailand and most of the industrialized world. Jordan made significant improvements in coverage between 1993 and 1999 and became both automated and decentralized, so that documents can be issued by any field office, not only the one nearest the place of residence. Other countries in the Middle East that have partially or fully automated systems, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have high birth registration coverage and produce comprehensive statistics.[212]

Reaching the entire population

In Senegal, where birth registration is estimated at 61 per cent, MICS 2 found that distance to the registry office was never cited as a reason for non-registration in the Region of Dakar, but was cited as a reason by as many as 21.7 per cent of respondents in the region of Tamba.[213] Whether a national registry system is centralized or decentralized, it is essential that its delivery points – the local registry offices – cover the national territory as completely as possible. No matter how extensive their static registration facilities may be, many countries have found that these must be supplemented by some type of mobile unit to extend services to marginalized groups, such as those living in city slums and geographically inaccessible areas. Argentina uses mobile units to service the region of Patagonia, while Chile has three state-of-the-art vans with computers and satellite connections to the central registry. It also has a marine unit in the southernmost region of the country to reach several islands. While most countries use less sophisticated equipment, more than 30, including Ecuador, Iran, Malaysia, Peru and Thailand, employ travelling registrars to search for unregistered children and issue birth certificates.[214]

In Niger, where only an estimated 45 per cent of births are registered[215] (fewer

Civil registration in India: a decentralized system

In India, with a population of over 998 million in 1999[207] and birth registration coverage of 35 per cent,[208] the national legal framework for registration is the 1969 Registration of Births and Deaths Act. The national authority for civil registration is the Office of the Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which provides overall coordination, direction, technical guidance and standards for civil registration throughout the country. Registration itself is decentralized to India's 25 states and seven union territories. In every state and union capital the Chief Registrar of Births and Deaths is responsible for coordinating, synchronizing and supervising the work of registration. The recording of vital events and the issuing of certificates are carried out at local level by 130,000 registrars and sub-registrars. The compilation of vital statistics is also decentralized, with the Chief Registrar of each state required to compile statistics based on registration data and submit these to the state government. Each state then provides a report to the national Office of the Registrar General, which compiles an *Annual Vital Statistics Report* for the entire country. Model rules on registration, a technical handbook published by the Registrar General's Office and standard registration forms and statistical returns ensure compatibility of information between the states.[209] In theory, the structure of India's registration system provides a good basis for the consistency of concepts, definitions, classifications and tabulations across the various sources of vital statistics. Unfortunately, state disparities in registration coverage (ranging from over 90 per cent to under 30 per cent), suggest that some states lack resources, support and perhaps awareness of the importance of registration. There is some way to go before every child in the world's second most populous country enjoys the right to an identity.

among the nomadic population), UNICEF makes use of the *cure salée* or 'salt cure' – when nomads gather at the end of the rainy season so that their cattle can graze on mineral-rich grasses – as an opportunity to deliver vaccines, provide information on HIV/AIDS and malaria, and promote action on birth registration. A workshop was held in 2000 with nomadic chiefs to emphasize the importance, and explain the mechanics, of registering nomadic children.[216]

Reaching the entire population is not only about geography. It is also essential that people trust the system and feel assured of its confidentiality. However, confidentiality may have different meanings in different cultural contexts. Some minorities fear that identification of their ethnic origins might lead to persecution, as happened in Rwanda. There are reports of people in the Middle East being reluctant to register for fear the information might be used for taxation purposes. The UN has issued guidelines on the subject of confidentiality and how data can be shared,[217] regional organizations such as the Council of Europe have adopted important standards,[218] and many countries have incorporated specific articles in their civil registration legislation. In Australia, where the system is decentralized to the state level, only non-identifying data are sent to the federal level where they are used to evaluate population changes and heath issues.[219] South Africa has a two-sided form, with one side devoted to detailed health information without personal identification. This is forwarded to relevant authorities and used for epidemiological purposes.

Establishing communication and trust is especially important if marginalized groups, particularly minorities, are to feel sufficiently empowered to approach authorities and register their children. Argentina therefore includes representatives from indigenous groups in local committees. Peru employs indigenous registrars in the Amazonian region,[220] while Thailand has established a special minorities registration section to handle their specific needs.[221]

Integrating birth registration with other services

Integrating birth registration in ongoing basic service programmes, such as immunization and primary health care, can be a cost-effective way of providing a service at the grassroots level without creating a parallel delivery system. Birth registration initiatives are more likely to prove sustainable if they are incorporated into existing legal and administrative structures or integrated with regular programmes in order to reduce costs. This is the strategy foreseen for Bangladesh, where birth registration will be interlinked with health delivery and is envisaged as a means of improving the coverage of immunization and other health services.[222] Uganda's revitalized registration system, which managed to register one million children in its first year of implementation, issues a free birth certificate with health messages printed on the back.[223] And in Ghana, districts where guinea worm is endemic have established successful community-based surveillance systems that, as well as detecting guinea worm cases, ensure the registration of births and infant and maternal deaths.[224]

As mentioned, countries where a large proportion of births take place in medical facilities can successfully tie birth registration to the maternal health care system. In some cases there might be a registration unit in the hospital. In others, the mother receives a certificate of live birth before she leaves hospital and a form that she can take to the registration office. In Qatar, for example, where 99 per cent of babies are born in hospital, the health and birth registration systems are closely linked. Babies are registered in hospital and the data are fed on-line to the Department of Preventive Health, which in turn sends one copy to the health centre nearest the mother and another to the Central Statistical Office. The health centre makes direct contact with the mother for post-natal care and immunization.[225] Health centres may be used to register births, as the network of health centres in some countries may be more developed than that of registration offices and health centres may have the transport to reach isolated areas. However, health services should not be burdened with the task of record keeping or issuing birth certificates. Rather, the health centre should pass registration records to the local registration office. In the case of mobile health and vaccination services, a local registrar can accompany the health team. Prior to the arrival of this team, communities should be informed, by radio and other means, that they will be able to register their children as well as having them immunized and they should be told what information they will need to provide.

Birth registration can also be incorporated into the educational system, so that children who are not registered in infancy can be registered when they enrol in primary school. In a number of countries, including Peru, school headmasters are responsible for registering children who do not already hold birth certificates.[226]

At the sub-national and grassroots level, inter-agency steering committees, with representatives of all the relevant players, can help to ensure that birth registration is mainstreamed and linked to other service delivery programmes.

Capacity building

Capacity building at every level is a crucial element of any comprehensive strategy to improve birth registration. Many countries, including Argentina, Colombia, Egypt, Panama, Jordan and Thailand have increased the skills of registrars through training programmes, handbooks and improved supervision. But capacity building means giving sufficient attention not only to technical training but also to motivation and orientation on human rights. In many cases, staff with full workloads will be asked to take on the extra responsibility of birth registration. Unless there is careful preparation, they may be reluctant to do so, as in the Kenya example discussed earlier, when assistant chiefs felt insufficiently compensated for adding civil registration to their duties. In contrast, part of the increase in birth registration in the Philippines is due to initiatives to motivate and encourage local registrars, including a biannual national convention, and an ordinance to make civil registrars career employees and, therefore, independent of political changes.

Training for those responsible for registration at local level needs to be supported by adequate guidance in the form of appropriate and easily understandable reference materials, updated at regular intervals, as well as proper monitoring and supervision.

When decentralizing authority to lower levels of government and empowering local officials, it is also important to involve members of minority groups and ensure their willing participation. In Panama, self-governing indigenous groups conduct their own registration. In the Philippines, at the request of the

Moslem community, the Government authorized special registration forms and procedures conforming to their religious traditions.[227]

Technical training should involve not only civil registration staff, focusing on operational aspects, but also – if the system is to provide valuable data to the nation – vital statistics staff, who must be updated on such aspects as the compilation, presentation and dissemination of data.

A longer term strategy to help mainstream the concept of civil registration is to introduce the subject into the curriculum of higher learning institutions such as medical and law schools; university faculties of sociology and statistical and demographic training centres. In the 1995 'Right to a Name and Nationality' campaign in Ecuador, students from the law faculties of the country's seven Catholic Universities joined the 38 mobile registration teams operating in rural areas. By helping the representatives of the civil registry, they gained valuable skills for their future career.[228]

Resources

On ratifying the CRC, governments recognized the right of every child born within their jurisdiction to be registered. This means that parents should be able to fulfil, their children's right to a name and nationality without economic constraints. While opportunity costs such as transport and the loss of working time may be unavoidable, the act of registration and the first copy of the certificate should be free, or so low in cost that the right to registration is not undermined, particularly for those whose poverty would otherwise exclude them. Governments, whether local or national, should resist the temptation to look upon birth registration as an income generating activity. Free registration and a birth certificate for every child are important indications that a state is committed to ensuring the rights of all children under its jurisdiction. This task has economic implications, including the costs of establishing an adequate network of registration offices, providing necessary materials, recruiting and training a sufficient number of registrars, and ensuring guidance for and supervision of this important activity, and governments should be prepared for these.

In Guinea-Bissau, with one of the world's lowest per capita GNPs,[197] and where MICS2 suggests that up to 58 per cent of children under 59 months are not registered,[198] the National Popular Assembly has approved a national programme for 2000-2003 that emphasizes, as a goal for children, the extension of birth registration coverage. The programme includes the modernization and decentralization of the registry system and a national campaign to register children under the age of eight.[199] By 2001, 56,000 children had been registered and, despite scarce financial resources, the service has been provided free of charge.[200] As the campaign continues, and a comprehensive registration system is established, the 'unit cost' of registration will fall.

Faced with competing priorities for overstretched budgets, governments may find it hard to commit sufficient resources for the establishment and maintenance of a nationwide civil registration system on a sustained basis – the returns on this investment are long-term. Strong arguments are needed to convince policy makers in charge of budget allocation that birth registration is necessary and worthwhile and can be cost-effective in terms of providing a ready source of important data and reducing the need for expensive ad hoc surveys. In this context, however, care needs to be taken to avoid an emphasis on capital equipment such as computers. A system may well become obsolete, and therefore unsustainable, unless there is a commitment to on-going investment. Other initiatives, inexpensive to launch and administer, can be of real benefit to a country's birth registration coverage, including such simple steps as issuing durable laminated cards instead of loose paper certificates.[201]

The most feasible solution to a scarcity of funds is to tap into existing resources. Although the cost of registration supplies and data collection and processing are not insignificant, overall costs can be reduced considerably by pursuing the strategy of integrating registration with other programmes, thus reducing expenses for staff and facilities. In Papua New Guinea, for example, the birth registration pilot project is designed to reduce costs as much as possible by making birth registration part of the district and provincial officers' duties.[202]

On another level, international organizations may consider re-orienting their technical cooperation programmes towards support for the establishment of efficient civil registration systems. Such initiatives would require UN agencies and bilateral agencies to support national efforts for a period of up to five years. Long-term commitment is needed to achieve sustainable registration systems and guarantee that every child receives a birth certificate.

Conclusion

Birth registration is a fundamental human right. It not only gives a child a recognized legal existence and identity, it is the sign that a child 'belongs' to a family, a

Empowering traditional birth attendants

In developing countries, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) assist many women giving birth in rural areas. In Niger, for example, up to 28 per cent of births in rural areas are attended by TBAs, compared to 4.7 per cent of births in urban areas.[229] TBAs (usually women) may have some experience in midwifery and often have skills in traditional healing. However, a TBA could simply be the neighbour who acts as the 'midwife' in the area. While some have had some formal training, many have not.

A number of countries show a positive relationship between the percentage of births attended by trained medical staff and the level of birth registration. While this needs further exploration, it suggests that the creation of links between TBAs and the civil registration system may be one way to improve birth registration. TBAs could inform parents of the requirement to register their child and of the benefits of such registration. They could also notify the local registry office that a birth has taken place, although the official recording of birth details should remain the responsibility of the registrar. Both Ghana[230] and Malaysia[231] have incorporated TBAs to some extent in their birth registration systems. In Malaysia, where birth registration is at least 90 per cent, some 80 per cent of deliveries are in hospitals and trained midwives attend most of the remainder. TBAs, however, are used by the indigenous population (who constitute 1 per cent of the population) and immigrant workers[232] and, therefore, constitute an important link between these marginalized groups and official administrative structures. There are countries where TBAs already carry out a number of additional tasks. In India,[233] Nigeria[234] and the Philippines,[235] for example, they have been trained to promote family planning services, while in Bangladesh they promote oral rehydration therapy.[236] Their potential for the promotion of birth registration could be explored.

community and a nation. It shows that a child has a place, and a stake, in all three. It opens the door to other rights such as access to health and education services, offers protection against discrimination and neglect, determines a child's treatment in the justice system, and lasts a lifetime – guaranteeing an individual's right to take their place in the social and political life of their country.

When more families stayed in one place for generations, birth registration may have seemed less important. Every individual was well known to the surrounding community. But with accelerating globalization and the growing movements of people both across and within national borders, having a recognized legal identity has become crucial.

Denial of this basic right means denying not only the right to an identity, enshrined in Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but many other rights to which every citizen is entitled. It is essential, therefore, that governments make every effort to provide registration facilities to the entire population, irrespective of ethnicity, political views, economic situation, language, geographical location or, indeed, the gender or marital status of a parent. And special efforts must be made to reach the most vulnerable children – including those who have lost their parents, children of single mothers and those born to parents who are illiterate, living in precarious economic conditions or affected by HIV/AIDS or other diseases. States should also ensure that children of refugees or undocumented workers within their jurisdiction are not denied the right to a full identity.

The root causes of non-registration are often economic and political, and as such it is a core development issue that must be addressed alongside poverty reduction and universal access to basic services. Realistic development planning to tackle poverty and provide basic services requires credible data covering all marginalized groups, making universal birth registration essential both for the child and for the nation.

Improving registration coverage depends upon a country's political will to implement change in the interest of its children. Measures introduced to increase demand for registration from the population must be matched by efforts to ensure supply by the administration. Demand can be stimulated by raising awareness of the benefits of registration and a birth certificate, by simplifying procedures and by ensuring that women, whether married or single, are entitled to register the birth of their child.

It is vital that registration and the all-important birth certificate are both free of charge.

Demand can be met by improving administrative coordination, promoting top-down, bottom-up approaches that involve actors from all levels – particularly grassroots actors at community level – introducing or modifying legislation, building capacity and, in countries where they are very active, training traditional birth attendants to promote registration. In addition, resources can be maximized by integrating birth registration with other services such as education or immunization programmes.

The establishment of an operational civil register and the issuing of a birth certificate to every child are measures within the reach of all national governments. Politics and economics must not stand in the way of the systematic provision of one of the most important pieces of paper a person will ever own. Important because the registration of every birth within a national boundary marks a step towards the development of a fully-fledged national administration and helps consolidate the foundations of civil society. But important, above all, because it is the only way to ensure that each and every child enjoys their full right to an identity and citizenship, and all that this implies.

This section contains information about some of the major UN agencies and international and regional NGOs working on issues related to birth registration. These contacts should serve as links to other types of organizations, particularly national and local NGOs, professional and community organizations, academic and other institutes and government bodies, whose work is relevant to this issue. It is not intended to be a comprehensive listing, nor does it prioritize or rank the organizations listed.

UNITED NATIONS AND ITS SPECIALIZED AGENCIES

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)

International Labour Organization
4, route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 799 8181
Fax: +41 22 799 8771
Email: ipec@ilo.org

Activities

IPEC works towards the progressive elimination of child labour by strengthening national capacities and by creating a world-wide movement to combat child labour. IPEC is currently running projects in more than 60 countries.

Website: www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 326 7000
Fax: +1 212 888 7465
Email: netmaster@unicef.org

Activities

UNICEF promotes the equal rights of children and women, guided by the CRC and CEDAW, through action and advocacy programmes at international, regional, national and local level. It works with governmental and non-governmental partners.

Website: www.unicef.org

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

1 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 906 5558
Fax: +1 212 906 5001

Activities

UNDP works with the governments of developing countries to promote policies that protect the rights of the poor, especially women, and help them gain access to financial, social and legal services.

Website: www.undp.org

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

7 Place de Fontenoy
75007 Paris
France
Tel.: +33 1 45 68 1813
Fax: +33 1 45 68 5626/28

Activities

UNESCO is a leading partner in the Education for All (EFA) initiative, working with other multilateral agencies, governments, bilateral agencies, civil society and NGOs to meet the challenge of providing quality education for all – an issue closely linked to birth registration.

Website: www.unesco.org

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR)

OHCHR-UNOG
8-14 Avenue de la Paix
CH 1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 917 9000
Fax: +41 22 917 9016
Email: webadmin.hchr@unog.ch

Activities

UNHCHR plays the leading role on human rights issues, promotes international cooperation for human rights, undertakes preventive human rights action and carries out human rights field activities and operations. The website provides access to all comments on States parties reports by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Website: www.unhchr.ch

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

C.P. 2500
CH 1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland
Tel.: + 41 22 739 7798
Fax: + 41 22 7397377
Email: hqpi00@unhcr.ch

Activities

One of UNHCR's top priorities is to provide international protection and assistance to refugee children and adolescents. Working with partners and communities, UNHCR tries to identify parents or carers. It investigates issues relating to children who are stateless and unregistered as a result of war, who belong to minorities or who are refugees, asylum seekers or the children of migrant workers.

Website: www.unhcr.ch

United Nations Population Division

Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Population Division
2 United Nations Plaza
Room DC2-1950
New York, NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 963 3179
Fax: +1 212 963 2147

Activities

The Population Division provides the international community with information on population and development. It provides guidance to the UN on population and development issues and undertakes regular studies on population trends, estimates, projections and policies and the relationships between population and development.

Website: www.un.org/esa/population/unpop.htm

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

220 East 42 Street
New York, NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 297 5020
Fax: +1 212 557 6416

Activities

UNFPA works in three main

programme areas: reproductive health; family planning and sexual health; and population and development strategies.
Website: www.unfpa.org

United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)

2 United Nations Plaza
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
New York, NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 963 4966
Fax: +1 212 963 1940

Activities
The responsibilities of UNSD include compiling, publishing and disseminating demographic statistics for all countries and regions, including statistics on births, deaths and other vital events. In 1989 UNSD, with the United Nations Population Fund, WHO and the International Institute for Vital Registration, designed an International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Member States. The Programme provides technical assistance and encourages countries to undertake long-term self-sustained programmes to strengthen or establish systems.
Website: www.un.org/Depts/unsd

World Health Organization (WHO)

Avenue Appia 20
CH 1211 Geneva 27
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 791 2718
Fax: +41 22 791 4881
Email: info@who.ch

Activities
WHO gives world-wide guidance in the health field, sets global standards for health, cooperates with governments to strengthen health programmes and develops appropriate health technology, information and standards. It is working with UNSD on the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Member States.
Website: www.who.int

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL NGOs AND NETWORKS

African Governance Alert (AGA)

Cirepe / AGA
BP 8332,
Yaoundé
Cameroon
Tel.: +237 221 021

Activities
AGA was established in 1994 in Cameroon under the name African Center for Pluridisciplinary Research on Ethnicity. It works to defend and promote human rights, particularly in education, democracy, peace, refugee issues and transparency in governance. It acquires civil state documents for indigenous children and raises awareness of the link between education and citizenship for indigenous groups, such as the Pygmies and native itinerant populations.
Website: www.hri.ca/partners/aga

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

PO Box 22696
London N4 3ZJ
UK
Tel.: +44 20 7226 0606
Fax: +44 20 7274 0230
Email: info@child-soldiers.org

Activities
The Coalition promotes legal human rights standards, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that prohibits the military recruitment of any person below 18 years of age – a practice that thrives on lack of birth registration. The Coalition asks governments to create systems for birth registration and proof-of-age documentation for all (including refugees and displaced persons), where these are not already available.
Website: www.child-soldiers.org

Human Rights Watch, Children's Rights Division

350 Fifth Avenue
34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299
USA
Tel.: +1 212 290 4700
Fax: +1 212 736 1300
Email: hrwnyc@hrw.org

Activities
The Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch sends fact-finding missions to assess rights abuses. The missions interview children, parents, rights activists, lawyers, childcare workers, government officials and others, working with local rights groups to identify abuses and strategies for change. Reports are provided to governments, international organizations, NGOs, policy makers and the media, to expose and prevent child rights abuses. Issues investigated have included registration and citizenship, particularly in relation to the Bedoons of Kuwait, juvenile justice in Zimbabwe and Kenya, unaccompanied children detained by the US immigration and naturalization service and the trafficking of girls and women.
Website: www.hrw.org/children

Instituto Interamericano del Niño. IIN (InterAmerican Children's Institute IACI)

Av. 8 de Octubre 2904
Casilla de Correo 16212
Montevideo (11600)
Uruguay
Tel.: +598 2 487 2150
Fax: +598 2 487 3242
Email: iin@redfacil.com.uy

Activities
IACI has been involved in the issue of civil registration since 1964. In the 1980s it developed initiatives in the legal and statistical fields, such as training and the promotion of laws to improve civil registration and vital statistics. IACI works with PLAN International, UNICEF and other organizations and governments of the region to promote universal birth registration. It draws upon UNICEF data, government reports by the countries to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and this Committee's remarks with respect to Article 7.
Website: www.iin.org.uy

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
Public Information Centre
19 avenue de la Paix
CH-1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel.: + 41 22 734 60 01
Fax: + 41 22 733 20 57 (ICRC general)
Fax: + 41 22 730 20 82
(Public Information Centre)
Email: webmaster.gva@icrc.org

Activities
ICRC is an impartial, neutral and independent organization working to protect and assist victims of war and internal violence. It directs and coordinates international relief activities and aims to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which work to assist and protect refugees, internally displaced people and civilians. They also seek to reunite families that have become separated. All these activities are facilitated by effective birth registration procedures.
Website: www.icrc.org

NGO Committee on UNICEF
UNICEF HQ, UNICEF House
3 UN Plaza
New York NY 10017
USA
Tel.: +1 212 824 6394
Fax: +1 212 824 6466
Email: ngocommittee@unicef.org

Activities
Established in 1952, the NGO Committee is a world-wide network of 125 NGOs working for children in more than 110 countries. It encourages consultation and cooperation among NGOs at all levels and with UNICEF to promote the well-being of children and to provide a forum for dialogue on children's issues and the work of UNICEF. Its projects include the Unregistered Children's Project, focusing on birth registration. Aimed at Southeast Asia when launched in 1996, it has since been extended to South Asia as a result of the Committee's partnership with PLAN International.
Website: www.ngosatunicef.org

NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child
c.o./ Defence for Children International
1 rue de Varambé
PO Box 88
CH-1211 Geneva 20
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 740 4730
Fax: +41 22 740 1145
Email: dci-ngo.group@pingnet.ch

Activities
The Group coordinates input into the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It also monitors the Alternative Reports submitted to this Committee, and these often comment on the efficacy of birth registration practice in the country concerned. Sub-groups follow such topics as child labour, sexual exploitation, refugee children and children in armed conflict, children in conflict with the law and children's issues in education and the media.
Website: www.crin.org/NGOGroupforCRC

PLAN International
Chobham House
Christchurch Way
Woking
Surrey GU12 1JG
UK
Tel.: +44 (0)1483 755 155
Fax: +44 (0)1483 756505

Activities
Plan International has been working on birth registration issues for many years and has made significant progress in Asia with the Unregistered Children Project. Mobile registration units have been established in a number of countries to facilitate registration of people living in rural, isolated communities. Elsewhere 'catching up' initiatives have been developed, for example on the first day of school each year or on the occasion of traditional festivities.
Website: www.plan-international.org

Save the Children Fund (UK)
17 Grove Lane
London SE5 8RD
UK
Tel.: +44 20 7703 5400
Fax: +44 20 7703 2278
Email: enquiries@scfuk.org.uk

Activities
SCF works in 70 countries, conducting research on children's issues, supporting practical projects that involve children and their families and advocating for changes to benefit children worldwide. SCF is very active in family reunification initiatives, which are facilitated by efficient birth registration and the provision of birth certificates to children.
Website: www.savethechildren.org.uk

ADDITIONAL WEB RESOURCES

www.childinfo.org/index2.htm
This website contains the UNICEF statistical databases, with detailed country specific information, plus global and regional analyses, used to assess progress since the 1990 World Summit for Children. The website provides a complete explanation of MICS and MICS2 methodology and includes the full set of technical tools for conducting these surveys. For data on birth registration click on 'Additional Child Rights'.

www.crin.org
The Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) is a global network that disseminates information about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and child rights among non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, inter-governmental organizations, educational institutions and other child rights experts. The network is supported, and receives funding from, UNICEF, Rädda Barnen, Save the Children UK and the International Save the Children Alliance. Extensive information, resources and publications are available on this website.

www.eldis.org
Eldis provides extensive links to online information on development in areas such as the environment, agriculture, disasters, human rights, civil rights and population. It also provides access to statistical information, major international organizations, research organizations, bibliographical information and databases.

www.hri.ca
Human Rights Internet (HRI) is dedicated to the empowerment of human rights activists and organizations, and to the education of governmental and intergovernmental agencies, officials and other actors on human rights issues. HRI has a children's rights programme highlighting such areas as legal rights and protection.

www.oneworld.net
OneWorld promotes human rights and sustainable development. The website provides information and articles on a vast range of human rights issues and coverage is global.

www.umn.edu/humanrts/index.html
The University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, developed by the University's Human Rights Centre, offers more than 7,200 human rights documents and materials on-line. These include treaties and other international instruments, regional materials, bibliographies and research guides, refugee and asylum sources, and links to over 3,000 other sites. The site also provides a search engine that can search for documents on multiple human rights sites.

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The Innocenti Digests

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, was established in 1988 to strengthen the research capability of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and to support its advocacy for children worldwide. The Centre (formally known as the International Child Development Centre) helps to identify and research current and future areas of UNICEF's work. Its prime objectives are to improve international understanding of issues relating to children's rights and to help facilitate the full implementaion of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in both industrialized and developing countries. The Innocenti Digests are produced by the Centre to provide reliable and accessible information on specific child rights issues.

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Previous Digests have addressed:

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BIRTH REGISTRATION: RIGHT FROM THE START

This Digest looks at birth registration – a fundamental human right that opens the door to other rights, including education and health care, participation and protection. It explains why the births of more than 50 million babies go unregistered every year. In legal terms, these children do not exist and their right to an official name and nationality is denied. Their access to basic services may be severely jeopardised and they may find themselves more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The effects can last a lifetime, with the unregistered adult unable to vote, open a bank account or obtain a marriage licence. Non-registration also has serious implications for the State. Put simply, countries need to know how many people they have and how many there are likely to be in the future, in order to plan effectively. This Digest emphasizes the crucial importance of birth registration, explores the obstacles to universal registration and highlights the actions – including awareness raising, legislative changes, resource allocation and capacity building – that are needed to ensure the registration of every child.

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